

PROLOGUE

Harry stepped into the lift, trying to ignore the looks on the other people's faces. He pressed the button for level nine, despite the fact that it was already lit up. Two witches, both much older than him, were failing to keep their voices down and Harry did his best to not respond to the whispered comment of "I'd gobble him right up."

He couldn't resist letting his mind wander onto the benefits and drawbacks of a turkey animagus form.

He'd grown accustomed to the stares, though he doubted he'd ever like them. Over two years ago, he'd defeated Voldemort. After a brief stay in the hospital wing at Hogwarts subjected to Madame Pomfrey's tender mercies, Harry had emerged a healthy young prophecy-free wizard with just as much purpose as the next.

In other words, Harry didn't know what he wanted to do with his life.

He'd missed out on his seventh year of schooling, but Hermione's tutelage ensured that he sat his NEWTS and passed with flying colors. It took six long years to locate and destroy all the pieces of the Dark Lord's soul but they had been successful. Like any leader, Harry got too much of the blame and too much of the credit.

Four months ago, after another unsuccessful meditation to determine his animagus form, Harry finally decided on something that he wanted to do, or more precisely some questions he wanted answered.

Three months ago Harry swung a bit of his political might and pressured the Ministry into allowing him to conduct a research project on a dangerous magical artifact in their possession: the veil in the Death Chamber or, as Harry's research had called it, the Exit.

Two months ago, Harry, Hermione, and Professor Vector had developed a rudimentary way to activate and interact with some of the primitive runes carved into the keystone on the mysterious archway. That very first day Harry was permitted physical access to invoke the runes the entire stone dais shifted and settled, lit up like the night sky for less than a second, and the mysterious constant slight wind blowing through the archway became still.

The veil just hung there like a perfectly normal, inanimate, harmless curtain. Until something was thrown in, then a gentle breeze would fluff the veil outward just slightly and suck the offending item in, never to be returned.

Harry's elation at his immediate success lasted about an hour.

Since that day two months ago, Harry hadn't managed a single iota of progress. Nothing was reacting to anything he tried. Nothing seemed to change and Harry couldn't even get the archway back to the way it had been before.

Voices and whispers from beyond were now nothing but silence, except for the brief moments when an object would be sent through.

Rocks, food, plants, bugs, objects tied with every sort of string imaginable. They all just disappeared into the Exit. Timed portkeys never returned and even the magical sensors got no readings the instant an object disappeared.

The Department of Mysteries was giving Harry neither help nor materials so he went "ingredient shopping" at a muggle pet store.

Hermione drew the line at three puppies when she discovered Adios, Sayonara, and Geronimo's empty collars. Perhaps Harry shouldn't have blurted out in anger that the last one in his closet was going to have her name changed from Toodles to Hermione.

Needless to say, Ron and Hermione reluctantly got a new puppy. After refusing to call the young poop factory either Toodles or Hermione, they settled on the name Padfoot. Primarily as a preventive measure in hopes that it would keep Harry from chucking her into the Exit as well.

The longest the gateway had stayed open was when Harry cast *Serpensortia* and tossed the oversized snake into it. That time, when the voices and whispers could be heard, Harry swore that there was a very clear pronouncement of, "Hey guys! It's open agai-," before being cut off.

Unspeakable Vargas had been observing that day, and she claimed that there was no such exclamation. Harry and Vargas had a small vocal disagreement, resulting in Harry having a private session with the Department psychiatrist before he was allowed to work on the Exit again.

Even still Vargas was one of the nicest Unspeakables Harry had interacted with. She at least didn't scowl when she saw him. Pretty much everyone else in the Department of Mysteries considered Harry and his project an annoyance and a burden.

A chime rang announcing the lift's arrival at level nine and Harry stepped back allowing Gruber and Gruber to walk ahead of him. He nodded at the witch manning the front desk and entered the circular spinning room, smiling happily, unconcerned with the matching looks of disdain on the two Unspeakable brothers in the rotating room with him.

The doors stopped spinning and the two Unspeakables walked out towards their offices. Harry waited for the door to close and the room started spinning once more. Harry was humming a cheerful tune to himself, as he walked through the door and down the steps of the Death Chamber.

"Good morning, Vargas," Harry greeted seeing she was already set up at a station and digging into her paperwork.

"Hmmp," Vargas grunted back. "I'm hung over and have two weeks worth of paperwork here. So how abouts we make it a quiet day, alright?"

Harry nodded silently and floated himself up into the air, ensuring he wouldn't even make the sound of footsteps.

"Show-off," Vargas mumbled to herself after glancing up.

Harry magically held his satchel in place in the air next to him, while it unlatched and opened up. The diagrams for a few basic runes floated out and in front of Harry. These were the oldest ones and therefore most likely to be capable of interaction with the archway. Harry

diligently worked his way around the rougher sections of the veil where the rune carvings were only partially visible.

Harry continued in silence for over three fruitless hours. He was tempted to try some more firecrackers and whizbangs. Unfortunately as fun as those were, they never produced any results and seemed to be somewhat of an unnecessary risk.

"You getting lunch, Potter?" Vargas asked curiously.

"Why Vargas, I never knew I was your type," Harry smirked back.

"You're not," Vargas snapped. "But I'm hungry. And you look like you're planning to work through lunch."

"I was hoping to crank through another foot of the rough stuff," Harry said pointing towards the lower right side of the stone archway.

She nodded. "Alright, I'll be back in five minutes. Can I trust you not to do something stupid in that amount of time?"

"I think I can handle myself," Harry attempted to placate her.

Vargas had left him alone many times before, but her inner eye still felt like a bug had flown into it. "You want anything from the cafeteria?"

"You mind grabbing me a sandwich?"

"What kind?"

"Whatever looks freshest," Harry said before adding, "Turkey maybe." He summoned his money pouch from the hovering satchel when Vargas interrupted calling over her shoulder, "Keep your money. You manage not to do anything stupid in the next five minutes and this one's on me."

Her parting remarks triggered some previous musings in Harry's mind. All the potential, plausible and hopeful ideas on the Exit had been failing. And there was still that category of ideas with the one he thought might make the difference, the *stupid* category. Jumping into

the veil and a few of the sacrificial plans on that list were admittedly somewhat questionable.

In the past Harry had sent spells through the veil, he'd sent transfigured objects, conjured objects, charmed objects, cursed objects, and enchanted objects through the veil.

He'd even stuck his arm into it, up to the elbow, before the Unspeakable working had tackled him to the ground and forced Harry to swear an oath to not intentionally do that again without approval. Harry had reluctantly acquiesced banking on the unclear aspect of just whose approval was required.

What Harry hadn't yet done was to stick one of his *magical* arms into it. In the early planning stages with Hermione and Professor Vector, Harry hadn't disputed the lack of brilliance in that particular idea with the two witches. But after all these failures, Harry figured it seemed like the next logical step and a sound, reasonable move.

Harry knew that he'd sent spells and magic in many times before, so poking around with one little magically manifested arm should be okay. He gave it a good three and a half second's worth of thought before deciding he should at least try testing the possibility now before Vargas returned.

Conveniently forgetting all promises not to do anything stupid, Harry cast his favorite magical sight spell on his eyes. For experimental work, the ability to observe them was necessary. Not to mention Harry was more confident in his abilities when he could see what he was doing. He called up a half dozen of the invisible magical arms as that was the number he was most comfortable with and had spent hundreds of hours extensively training with. The spell on his eyes permitted him to see the long, thin white tubes of magical light spreading out from his body with amorphous hands and fingers at the ends. They were slowly waving on the ambient flows of magic, waiting for a purpose.

Harry looked towards the Exit and saw it looked the same way it had for the past two months, a solid empty black void from which no magic was emanating. He conjured a small ball that was glowing soft grey light from the magic and tossed it through the archway. The

black in the gateway flashed white ever so briefly, and the sounds of distant whispers disappeared as quickly as they appeared.

Harry's bottom pair of magical appendages was positioning him directly in the center of the void and halfway up its height.

Harry knew that if he thought much more on the issue, he'd probably stop. So without hesitation, he quickly moved a magical arm right up to the surface of the void. He gently pushed through ever so slightly and pulled right back.

The magic didn't even flicker.

Deciding he hadn't pushed far enough into it, Harry readied a magical blade to cut off his own magical arm if need be. He took a deep breath and stuck the exploratory magical manifestation deeper into the void, over a foot of it now submerged in the gateway.

Harry pulled it right back out only to see that once again, not even a sliver of magic responded.

Figuring he might as well try a little deeper, Harry plunged a single magical arm and kept it sending it through hoping to feel something in there or at least trigger the magic of the Exit to respond when his control over the arm disappeared and he was pulled violently face first.

Two of Harry's magical arms grabbed on to both sides of the stone archway and held him back from falling in further. They were struggling mightily to pull Harry back out. With barely a thought the two arms below him swept backwards and grabbed onto on the first row of steps in the Death Chamber.

The sirens in the room started blaring, and lights on the ceiling were flashing.

The sides of the archway began to crack and crumble. Harry quickly let go of the ancient artifact and sent those two magical arms across towards the steps, trying to pull himself back that way.

His fifth magical arm was fighting to pull his trapped one free. The magical blade seemed to have no effect on the trapped arm that was outside of Harry's control. He was losing ground and it was only a matter of time.

While trying to hold on for dear life and ignore the blaring alarm, Harry was reminded of one of the early conversations he'd had with Hermione and Professor Vector.

"It's obviously a gateway to somewhere," Hermione explained. "A few texts allude that it is a gateway to death, the afterlife, or even Hell."

"None of them have ever conclusively known where it leads to," Professor Vector added. "All the history is conjecture."

"So it just as likely is a gateway to Heaven as it is to Hell," Harry theorized.

"Doubtful," Hermione scoffed.

"Hey now," Harry argued. "All it takes is for the portal to be one-way, or for some other reason impossible to go back through. Maybe once you get there, no one wants to come back. Sirius could be living it up surrounded by all the strippers and snausages he could ever want."

"Fine," Hermione grumbled in agreement. "The physical evidence indicates it could be a gateway just about anywhere. But for all intents and purposes to the known world, it leads to death, so don't go and do anything stupid!"

Harry looked at his current situation with the lower two thirds of his body sucked into the Exit, which was currently blinding with magic to his spelled eyes. This would more than likely count as something stupid.

Harry could hear strange voices and whispers, but most of the sounds from the Exit were drowned out by the blaring alarms.

"Potter!" Vargas shrieked as she sprinted back into the Death Chamber.

Harry's forehead was dripping with sweat and he was feeling his energy fade. He saw Vargas extending her hand towards him.

"Grab on to my hand!"

Harry shook his head slowly. "Can't," he grunted through the strain. "I'd just pull you in."

Vargas winced as she spotted the solid rock stairs scraping the ground, being dragged towards Harry in his efforts to hold on. She tried to summon him but her spells were insignificant against the pull of the Exit.

Harry grunted and had slipped into the gateway so deep only his head remained visible. He knew he could destroy the archway and likely the Exit, but if he survived that, then he'd truly have no answers or way to reach Sirius. His energy was being depleted so quickly that any decision he had to make better be made soon.

Harry's answer came in the form of a clear voice mixed in with the whispers inside the veil. The voice scoffed, "What's the matter? You chicken?"

Never one to back down from a challenge, Harry calmed significantly and used one of his invisible magical arms to grab his satchel. He smiled with a mix of resignation and determination at Vargas.

If Harry had been thinking clearer, he might have come up with something more profound to say with his last words on this world.

"You can keep my sandwich."

Author's Note: *Big thanks to IP, JJ, Chuck, Jim, Chris, and everyone else who's been helping me nail down this outline and edit this fic. All feedback, flames, criticisms, mindless praise, and marriage proposals are always welcome.*

CHAPTER ONE

Harry knew it was a stupid idea when he started to long for the sensations of portkey travel. Getting sucked into the Exit, he estimated felt like getting kicked in the balls with a seasickness curse. The wind rushing past was making Harry's cheeks flap and he couldn't even get out a proper manly scream of fright.

He grabbed onto his satchel with his right arm, not really trusting his magic to hold on to the bag. The feeling of falling while your body is being stretched from both top and bottom was as nauseating as it was painful. Compounding his discomfort was that the sheer amount of magic around him was blinding. He had his eyes shut tightly but the spell cast on them was forcing him to view all the surrounding magic and in a higher concentration that he'd ever seen before.

Harry idly wondered if he was scorching his optic nerve as he struggled to hold his wand up and cancel the magical sight spell. With a high-pitched grunt-like sound he succeeded.

Harry's glasses had so far managed to stay in place and he blinked his eyes open. He immediately regretted that move as he saw he was falling extremely fast through some sort of tube coated in blood and ectoplasm. The walls were semi-translucent and glancing through the pinkish haze in all directions there were endless arrays of more and more fleshy tubes.

Harry's vision blurred and everything around him seemed to gain a warming purple tinge. Oblivious to his continued descent, he thought back to his more often than not strained relationship with his best friends, Ron and Hermione. He wondered if maybe now Ginny could move on. He thought of the love he held for his parents and then Sirius.

There was a violent jerk to his right and Harry felt his body turn and rotate as gravity was pulling him, this time in a different direction. Thoughts of Sirius reminded Harry that he'd been sucked into the Exit and his vision cleared noticeably. Another jerk sent Harry careening forward, finally managing the elusive high-pitched manly scream that had evaded him earlier.

Harry could feel his stomach churning and really didn't want to know what puking in this ectoplasmic sorting system would do. Just when Harry didn't think he'd be able to make it, he was unceremoniously sent shooting out of the Exit, sliding across the stone floor, and crashing into the bottom set of stairs in the Death Chamber.

The moment Harry lifted his body up he began to retch all over the last step beneath him. He stopped to catch his breath for less than a second before resuming to empty the contents of his stomach. The thick puddle below him was spilling over the edge of the step and onto the floor.

Harry got a few more breaths of air and proceeded to dry heave every last painful drop he could. He wiped his mouth and looked up, only to find three Unspeakables surrounding him with their wands drawn and aimed at him.

Before he could react, two whispered disarming spells hit him, and his wand went flying. His body was forcefully pushed back onto the stairs. He opened his mouth to say something and only managed to belch a thick cloud of whitish smoke and dust.

Harry proceeded to cough and turned away from the welcoming committee. Thinking quickly he exclaimed, "Hang on. Let me drink the counter potion to my nundu's breath before you guys get sick."

Two of the Unspeakables cast immediate bubblehead charms, while the third had impressively managed to conjure or call an entire set of scuba gear complete with a working oxygen tank.

None of them made any move to stop Harry as he pulled a potion vial from his satchel and drank it immediately.

Harry let out a contented sigh as the steam whistled out his ears.

"You lied to us," the first Unspeakable stated. "That was pepper-up."

"True," Harry admitted tossing the empty vial into his bag. "But I didn't think you'd let me take it, if you knew it was pepper-up. Besides I was really exhausted and did you see how much I puked here? That's like what I eat in a week."

Finally after a moment of catching up to his surroundings and thinking clearer thanks to the potion, Harry realized that these Unspeakables didn't recognize him at all. Considering Harry definitely recognized Gruber, it was safe to assume this was an alternate dimension, one of the more intriguing potential destinations theorized for the Exit.

Seeking confirmation, Harry asked Gruber. "Do you have a brother that's also an Unspeakable?"

Gruber looked over towards his colleague and back at Harry. He spoke with a thick Slavic accent and was clearly sore about the issue. "If you must know my *sister* retired from the Ministry three weeks ago. She wasted her pension on a gender reassignment potion. I knew mother breast fed him too long."

"Wow," Harry uncertainly answered. "Okay."

"You're another dimension traveler, aren't you?" The lead Unspeakable asked.

"Easy guys," Harry tried to calm them with a smile, holding up his hands and acting harmless. "I'm one of you. Hold on, you said *another*? Did Sirius Black perchance come through here?"

The lead Unspeakable glanced at Gruber and then the woman to his left, all three of them still keeping their wands trained on Harry.

Hoping for a little less hostility, and fearing the idea that criminals sentenced to death may have just popped out into this world to cause problems, Harry explained. "Yeah, I think I am dimension traveler, considering I recognize Gruber there who in my world has a brother that's also an agent. And none of you seem to recognize me. I guess I'm not part of the Department in this world?"

The Unspeakables seemed to relax just slightly after catching each other's posture. "Sirius Black you're after?"

Harry nodded eagerly, jumping at the opening for a little information digging. Thinking of the role he should play, "Escaped convict Black? You betcha."

"We interrogated him," the lead Unspeakable said, standing straighter. "He's innocent of the charges you imprisoned him for."

"I know," Harry agreed, trying to imagine how the average Ministry worker would handle this. "But the law is the law. And he broke out of Azkaban. All breakouts get magically drained solitude or the Kiss."

"Excuse me?"

Harry puffed himself up proudly. "No man is above the law. Not even an innocent one."

The female was clearly confused by Harry's words and inched closer. "Who are you?"

"Come on guys, I'm one of you," Harry said, getting the feeling the walls were closing in on him.

"Your name," the lead Unspeakable ordered while slipping into a defensive stance.

Harry bit his lip for a second, and knew that if word got out he was a dimension traveler, he'd become rather well known, at least in certain circles, much quicker than he'd like. Not to mention the bloody red tape he'd no doubt have to go through. "I think for the sake of both our dimensions-" Harry cut off as he stepped back, twisting his body from three incoming spells. He avoided the stunner and the first body bind, but the second body bind clipped him on the shin.

Harry felt his body stiffen and he struggled to move his arms and legs. He was about to snap the weak spell when the female on his left ran up to him, and slapped a pair of magic inhibiting handcuffs over both of his wrists in a very precise and practiced motion.

Knowing he had an advantage, Harry decided to play along and accept his apparent defeat.

"We are going to interrogate you with Veritaserum," said the lead Unspeakable. "Standard operating procedure, you understand."

Harry raised a curious eyebrow. "You have a standard operating procedure for dimension travelers?"

The lead Unspeakable frowned at Harry and stared silently at him.

Harry made a show of wilting under the powerful stare and jumped at the opportunity. Slowly lifting his head to look the Unspeakable right back in the eye, Harry asked, "Was Sirius Black the last person you interrogated?"

Seizing advantage of the eye contact, Harry slipped into the Unspeakable's consciousness and caught glimpses of the memories flashing by that his words stirred. He saw the paperwork and discovered this was Senior Agent David Downing. The most interesting thing Harry managed to glean was the date of Sirius's arrival was April 5, 2006, or more accurately only two months ago today, the same day of Harry's only success with the Exit.

"Dammit," Downing cursed looking away, pushing Harry out of his mind as quickly as he could. "Keep your shields up and don't look this bugger in the eye."

"Agent Downing, is it?" Harry greeted, enjoying the victorious pain of being discovered and ejected. "Just wanted to keep you on your toes. A little reminder that magic inhibiting cuffs only stop magic from the wrists outward."

Downing sent a stunner at Harry, who dodged the spell. "Hey!" Harry argued. "I'm wearing cuffs. I'm coming peacefully. No need to be rude."

"Gruber, get his bag," Downing instructed while vanishing the puke from the steps. He turned to Harry, almost daring him to try Legilimency again. "And you lead the way towards the interrogation rooms on level eight."

Harry nodded, mentally cataloguing his wand was with Downing and bag was with Gruber. "Of course, Agent Downing," he said with a grin, knowing that just saying the Unspeakable's name riled him.

Harry's wrists were pulled together and bound by the magic of the cuffs. He calmly made his way up the steps, silently thanking the inventor of pepper-up once again.

The Unspeakables carefully followed Harry, all of them with their wands aimed at his back and a spell on the tip of their tongues.

Harry entered the circular spinning room and contemplated trying to escape here. But the spinning room had more identification and detection spells than he could hope to avoid. He turned towards the Unspeakables to get a glance of how they carried themselves and seek out any advantages.

"Face forward," Downing ordered. "Or we may misinterpret your attempts at *coming peacefully*."

Harry turned back around and doubted he'd be able to wrestle all three of their wands from them simultaneously. Breaking their necks was out of the question but that didn't stop him from once again wishing he were evil, for simplicity's sake. His best option was to use his magical arms to stun them, which would probably sap most of his energy. He quietly led the Unspeakables past the front desk that was being manned by the same witch as Harry had seen this morning.

Harry silently thanked his luck that the lift was empty when the doors opened. The three Unspeakables strategically maneuvered to surround him. Agent Downing pressed the button for level eight, keeping the tip of his wand aimed at Harry's neck.

Harry took a deep breath knowing this was going to be exhausting. The very second the lift doors closed, six invisible magical arms sprung to silent life extended from his body. Three of them snaked their way unnoticed and hovered right behind the base of the Unspeakables' necks, charging with energy. Hoping this would work, Harry willed the three arms simultaneously forward, hitting the Unspeakables with stunning spells.

All four people in the lift collapsed to the floor. The three Unspeakables crumpled because they were knocked unconscious, and Harry fell due to the sudden extreme draw on his magic.

Harry caught his breath, while the three other invisible arms retrieved his wand, grabbed his bag, and used the key to remove the magic inhibiting cuffs. He decided a pair of magic inhibiting cuffs could be pretty useful and stashed them with their key in his satchel. He steadied himself and stood, wavering as his equilibrium shifted. He knew he'd be paying for this later, but he summoned another potion vial and downed a second dose of pepper-up.

Steam shot out, hot and raw, scorching his inner ears. He was going to be down for the count when this wore off, but he needed to get away from here if he was going to keep his secrets intact.

Feeling that third wind kick in, Harry decided on a pair of layered memory charms. Just before he could cast the memory alteration, he heard the lift chime arriving at level eight. He quickly pulled the three unconscious bodies off to the side and hopefully out of view. He needed his luck to hold up as the lift doors opened, desperately hoping no one wanted to get on the lift at this floor.

Harry stuck his head out into level eight and saw a few Aurors looking toward him inquisitively. "This isn't the atrium," Harry announced smacking himself in the forehead as he quickly pushed the button inside the lift. He kept himself positioned in front of the Unspeakables wondering if perhaps this was the longest amount of time a pair of lift doors had ever stayed open.

The Aurors snickered at the loud sound of someone smacking himself in the head but went right back to their own business ignoring the unidentified, seemingly unaccompanied young man lost in the Ministry.

Once he was alone again, Harry focused immediately on a subtle memory alteration that would be hard to identify unless you knew it was there. Leaving the memories of their interaction intact, Harry changed their perception of him into that of a young buxom blonde woman. He shifted their memories of questions about Sirius Black into questions about Lucius Malfoy.

After applying a glamour charm that made him appear to match their altered memories, Harry locked them in body binds and woke the three Unspeakables up. He spoke with a feminine sneer and drawl,

“Your bloody shields are keeping my spell out, but I doubt you can resist it when you’re staring me in the eye. *Obliviate!*”

Harry did a simplistic memory modification charm this time, wiping out the last half hour from their minds. While still dazed from the memory charm that he wanted them to find, Harry transfigured the three Unspeakables into three shiny silver coins and canceled his glamour charm. The entire process took less than a minute from conceptualization to execution.

When the doors reopened at the atrium, Harry calmly exited carrying his satchel under his arm. As he walked past the fountain, he tossed the three coins into the water. The human to inanimate transfiguration was set to be released in exactly fifteen minutes, well after he was long gone.

Harry strolled out of the Ministry of Magic satisfied he’d made his escape and about as covered as he was going to get without doubling back to the Department of Mysteries. Looking up into the early afternoon London sun, he saw a world of answers to his questions about Sirius and the Exit all around him. He just had to find them.

All signs indicated Harry was in an alternate dimension, existing fully independent of his world. Since he hadn’t been recognized, it was safe to assume the Harry Potter of this world was either dead or not quite as famous.

He had his wand and his satchel, with his research notes on the Exit and a few emergency potions. He had roughly fifty galleons in a small pouch, about ninety pounds in his wallet, and an absolute certainty that trying to use his credit cards would be a bad idea.

Harry walked to a nearby muggle café, ordered a meal to help fill his empty stomach, and took a moment to think things over. He wasn’t sure if he’d be able to go back through the Veil and he wasn’t about to try until he had more answers. He was tired enough that he wouldn’t even entertain the possibility without more rest.

He could go to Hogwarts, but he wasn’t sure whether Dumbledore or McGonagall might still be alive in this world. Harry realized that

Voldemort could be alive in this world as well, in which case Hogwarts could have been razed to the ground or taken over. By the same measure Hogwarts could be a fashion institute and the Harry Potter of this world could be the androgynous one snootily using a fake French accent at the door.

With no idea about anything in this world, Harry focused on the best solution to most of his problems: finding Sirius.

Harry considered hitting Diagon Alley and staying at the Leaky Cauldron, but when he stood up after his meal he realized just how tired he was quickly getting. He decided to head to the one place that would feel most like home.

Harry walked out of sight and apparated to a back yard he was intimately familiar with. There was trash rotting and a completely unkempt growth crawling up the side of the building. He smiled to see there wasn't a Fidelius Charm as he gazed up the back side of Number 12 Grimmauld Place.

The back door was stuck shut, but an alohomora and a running start fixed that problem.

Harry crashed into the pantry, just off the side of the kitchen and fell to the floor skidding through a thick layer of dust. Cobwebs that would fit Acromantulas were littered all over the place. Sheets covered furniture and a strong, stale musty smell permeated the manor.

There was no sign of Sirius here, nor was there any sign anyone had been here in decades.

Harry stood back up and felt a wave of dizziness wash over him. It appeared like his body was going to take its nap here whether he liked it or not.

Stumbling into the living room Harry scourgified the immediate area and pulled a sheet off of the large couch. He quickly put up a few rudimentary protection wards and collapsed onto the couch. He grabbed onto the magically cleaned sheet and pulled it over himself while already in the process of snoring.

Sixteen hours later, Harry yawned and felt a weight on his chest as he exhaled. He opened his eyes and found himself staring into a pair of impossibly wide bright eyes staring right back at him.

“Is it true?” the squeaky voice inquired hopefully. “New Master has returned?”

Harry shrieked as he realized a wrinkly old house elf had mounted him in his sleep. He swung his arm wildly and swatted the elf across the room into the wall. A loud crunch and clatter as the elf landed stirred a small cloud of dust into the air.

“It’s true!” The elf cheered wickedly. “Master has punished! Oh Master!”

Harry wiped the eye boogers from his face and took a better look at the wrinkled little urchin. “Kreacher?”

“Master knows Kreacher?” Kreacher cheered before smacking himself in the head. “Stupid Kreacher! Of course *Master* knows Kreacher!”

Harry wiped his eyes once more, to make sure they weren’t playing tricks on him.

Kreacher ran up to Harry and hugged his leg. “Kreacher’s been bad! Punish Kreacher, Master! Then Kreacher will start cleaning this place up.”

“You *want* to be punished?” Harry inquired having always suspected most elves were masochists.

“Kreacher deserves it!” the elf gasped and slapped a hand over his mouth. “Kreacher will sharpen all the blood traitor torturing tools!”

“Wait, Kreacher!”

“Yes, Master?” Kreacher said sticking his rear end out waiting to be punished.

Harry just looked at the old elf that was practically begging to be spanked and completely forgot what he was going to say.

“Would you like me to go steal one of the neighborhood muggles for you, Master?”

“No,” Harry answered immediately. “I just... you know what. Forget it. It doesn’t matter. Do whatever you want.”

“Kreacher will start cleaning the blades, chains, and tenderizing mallets! Oh it will be ever so much fun, Master!”

Harry watched the disturbed house elf scurry away. Considering the first Kreacher Harry met had chosen death over serving blood traitors, Harry was once again reminded that this was a completely different dimension with a different history.

There was a loud screech of metal dragging across metal from upstairs. Harry decided to go get some breakfast and begin the search for his godfather. He would put off to later the decision of ever returning to Grimmauld Place again.

Harry located his satchel, cast a cleaning charm over his robes, and focused on Diagon Alley. With a soft pop he apparated away, reappearing in the magical alley.

With practiced ease, Harry took stock of his surroundings, seeing no immediate threats. There were a few people walking around, but not an exorbitant amount. There wasn’t a strong sense of impending doom, but this wasn’t the carefree relaxation that Wizarding Britain had become after the destruction of his world’s Voldemort. Those people had been too relaxed and complacent. The people Harry saw here were cautious and aware, many of them sneaking glances at him before moving along to continue their business.

Unsure what to make of this, Harry ventured towards the center of the Alley, and spotted a diner with patio seating. It looked pretty busy which was what Harry was looking for. He bought a copy of the *Daily Prophet* at the front counter and was seated outdoors, with his back to a wall, so he could watch the people in the alley while listening in to others’ conversations.

He ordered a simple breakfast platter, and was keeping his eyes and ears open. Sipping on his juice, Harry opened the *Daily Prophet* and saw the front page. June 6, 2006 was the date indicating he hadn't moved temporally at all through the Exit. The entire front page was devoted to England's chances in the upcoming Quidditch World Cup. There were articles on the team, the event, the competition, but not a single mention of Death Eaters or Voldemort. Harry took this as a good sign.

He watched a familiar brown-haired woman walk into the apothecary across the street unable to connect a name to her face, but pretty sure she had been a year behind him and a Hufflepuff. He continued eating and flipping through the paper when a small article caught his eye and Harry began to choke. Apparently Death Eater attacks didn't warrant the front page. Or any of the first six pages for that matter.

"Careful there, buddy," a man who had been seated next to him said. He began to pat Harry on the back to keep him from choking.

"Thanks," Harry said getting a hold of himself. One or two sudden realizations were understandable, but to find out Death Eater attacks didn't warrant the front page, to find out that Voldemort was still around, that the muggles in the article were Vernon and Petunia Dursley, and that the Assistant Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, James Potter, had intervened caused Harry to gasp in the middle of swallowing. "Sorry. Went down the wrong pipe."

"Breakfast can be a tricky mistress," the man said with a smile.

Harry recognized the man seated next to him despite not having seen him in over a decade. "It's the forks that trip me up. I keep grabbing the wrong end."

"As long as you remember which hole in your face to put the food, you should be okay," the man nodded extending his hand in greeting. "Florean Fortescue."

Harry shook his hand. "I'm Harry."

"Aren't we all?" Florean retorted before glancing at Harry's table. "You want some company?"

“Sure,” Harry said eager to get a few answers from someone he relatively trusted and was obviously willing to talk. He moved his newspaper out of the way while Florean brought his plate over with him.

“So what did you read that caused you to inhale your scrambled eggs?” Florean asked as he took advantage of the better jams on Harry’s table. He looked up and saw Harry staring at him curiously. “I happened to be looking over when your eyes went wide and you began to choke.”

Harry nodded, though erring on the side of caution. “I was surprised to read about a Death Eater attack to be honest.”

“Really?” Florean asked curiously. “What was so surprising about that?”

“Well, I know I’ve got the accent nailed,” Harry grinned. “But I’m not actually from around here. And considering I remembered something about an attack many years ago, I was surprised they were still going on.”

Florean shook his head. “They’re sporadic, but they’ve been around for what feels like as long as I can remember. It’s been years since my shop had any spell damage I needed repaired, but the threat is always there.”

“You don’t seem to let it get you down,” Harry commented.

“I sell ice cream,” Florean grinned. “All I deal in are smiles.”

“Never had the taint of the war darken your doorstep?”

“War?” Florean asked curiously in between bites of breakfast. “What war? The Death Eaters and the Dark Lord are terrorists, thugs, at best. A couple of my neighbors were killed in an attack. It wasn’t some glorious battle nor was their home part of some strategic plan. It was just an attack. Too many good people have been caught in attacks, but to call what those terrorists do a *war* gives them a respect they’ve not earned.”

Harry nodded. "I'm sorry to hear that. About your neighbors I mean. It's probably the fact that it's not descended into all out war that's kept the whole thing going for so long."

Floean was wiping his mouth having finished his meal. "You certainly have interesting ideas about pleasant breakfast conversation."

"My apologies," Harry nodded. "You asked what startled me in the paper and my mind likes to go off on tangents."

"No apology needed," Floean waved him off. "I wasn't bothered in the slightest. But I should get back and prep my store for opening. It's been a pleasure, Harry."

"One last question," Harry interjected. "If you don't mind humoring me, but have you by chance seen Sirius Black?"

"The new one?"

Harry tried to mask his surprise. "There's more than one?"

"Sirius Black was a young man murdered twenty-five years ago," Floean explained swinging his cloak over his shoulders. "But another man with that name came into my shop just about a week ago with his cousin, Auror Tonks-Lupin."

"Thank you," Harry smiled. "Good luck on dealing with only smiles today."

Floean looked at the sky and saw the sun was shining brightly. "It's going to be a hot one. I doubt I'll need luck to have a very busy and profitable day."

Harry watched the pleasant man walk briskly down the alley towards the ice cream parlor and thought about his first solid lead. It appeared that as much as things change, some things, like Tonks and Moony, stay the same no matter what dimension you land in.

Harry left a galleon and seven sickles to cover his breakfast and tip. He had to be careful with his money as he didn't have much with him.

All the good wizarding records for locating someone often required identification and were handled at the Ministry, which was not a place Harry wanted to go if he didn't have to. Thus he began walking towards the Leaky Cauldron intent on venturing out into non-magical London.

"G'morning, Tom," Harry greeted as he walked into the Leaky Cauldron.

"Morning," Tom nodded looking at Harry curiously unable to recognize him. "Anything I can do for you, Mr....?"

"Harry's fine," Harry said extending his hand to shake. "And I was hoping you might have a phone book and a phone I could use?"

"If you want a room, local calls are included but otherwise, the pay phone right out front has a book," Tom said pointing towards the street. "I check every morning to make sure no one's run off with it."

"Thanks," Harry nodded and walked out into the muggle side of London. He picked up the phone book and quickly flipped to the *L* section. Just as he'd hoped *Lupin, Remus* was listed but not at any address Harry remembered. He picked up the phone and dialed the number letting it ring for twenty seconds before admitting defeat that no one was answering.

He walked back into the Leaky Cauldron. "I don't suppose you know where Old Ford Road is?"

"Runs through Bethnal Green as I recall," Tom answered.

"There an apparition point there?" Harry asked.

Tom nodded. "Sure. Probably will drop ya at the tube station, but it'll get you close."

"Thanks," Harry nodded and walked out. He made sure he was clear of any wards on the Leaky Cauldron and out of view from any muggles. Focusing on Bethnal Green, Harry apparated away. He got directions from a young woman in the tube station and found himself walking down the road listed as Remus' address.

Harry couldn't remember the numbers other than a three and a seven were involved so he cast the spell that would allow him to see magic. He began walking down the road, directly across from a nicely wooded park when he noticed a cellar glowing with magic.

Harry was going to investigate and see if this was the place when he spotted a large black dog, sunning itself in the park across the street. His face split into a bright grin as he walked up to the extremely familiar mutt that was obviously licking himself in a potentially embarrassing fashion.

"You know I think it's as clean as it's going to get," Harry stated having successfully snuck up on the dog.

The grim-looking canine stopped immediately, lifted his head, and slowly turned towards the vaguely recognizable voice with an expression as close to surprise as a dog could possibly have.

"*Crikey*, Padfoot!" Harry yelped throwing an arm up to cover his eyes. "Put that lipstick away."

CHAPTER TWO

The large black dog took a big sniff of the young man in front of him.

Harry just smiled as the dog glanced up at him and sniffed again. Finally having reached a conclusion, there was a soft pop and the dog was replaced with an overjoyed Sirius Black.

“Harry!” Sirius screamed at the top of his lungs. He grabbed Harry in a hug and pulled him tight.

Harry returned the embrace and was patting his godfather on the back. “Hi Sirius.”

Sirius was not going to let go, as tears were actually in his eyes. He knew better than to let *that* get out.

“Umm... Sirius?”

Sirius sniffled and hugged tighter. He shook his head, making it clear he wasn’t going to be letting go from this hug any time soon.

“Sirius,” Harry pleaded. “Come on. You’re poking me.”

Sirius wiped his eyes and pulled away, forgetting that he’d been ‘cleaning’ in public. “Sorry,” Sirius said, unable to stop grinning. “I guess I’m just real happy to see you.”

Harry groaned. “Way to stay classy, Padfoot.”

Sirius let out one of those familiar barks of laughter. He stepped back and playfully frowned. “You grew up on me! Merlin’s balls, you’re old, Harry!”

“It’s been ten years,” Harry admitted ruefully. “And... *bugger me*. You look younger than I’ve ever seen you!”

“I know!” Sirius agreed and looked around them. “Crap. I didn’t exactly look both ways before transforming just now. You don’t think anyone saw us, did you?”

Harry glanced around and didn't see anyone staring at Sirius in awe or fear. "Don't know."

"Let's hope not," Sirius nodded grabbing Harry by the arm and beginning to walk down the street. "You don't have to be anywhere, do you?"

Harry sighed, falling into step with his godfather. "Yes, Sirius. I've followed you into a brand new dimension, managed to locate you, and now have to cut it short for a board meeting before lunch."

Sirius grinned at the thought Harry came after him. "Excellent! We've got lots to catch up on. You ready to go get drunk and trade stories?"

"It's ten in the morning!"

"You're right," Sirius nodded. "The bars probably aren't open yet."

Harry couldn't stop himself from smiling at his godfather's priorities. "Where are you living?"

"Oh good idea! Moony's got some firewhiskey and a bunch of muggle stuff."

"I do want to catch up, Sirius, but are you sure drinking this early is the best idea?"

Sirius led Harry across the street. "I don't know. Are the last ten years of your life anything like the first five at Hogwarts were?"

Harry paused and agreed. "You're right. We need alcohol."

They were on the steps of the flat next to the magically warded cellar when a man dressed like a Ministry Obliviator came scurrying up. "Did you guys see anything like a man-dog around here?"

"He went that way," Sirius and Harry answered in unison, both pointing in the same direction down the street.

The Obliviator hurried off in the direction they pointed without giving another look back at the two men who weren't exactly dressed like the average muggle.

Sirius and Harry grinned at each other. Sirius pointed out, "Great minds-

"There's nothing great about your-

"Get inside," Sirius ordered, interrupting Harry right back.

Harry jogged up the steps to the door, shaking his head in disbelief. "I can't believe I found you."

Harry walked into the modest home while Sirius shut the door behind them. Next to the door, Sirius triggered a simple ward that would silence the home from neighbors and the outside world.

"Harry!" He once more screamed as he jumped onto his startled godson's back.

Harry stumbled forward but caught the edge of a chair and kept from falling. He let Sirius hug him again this time from behind, grateful not to be poked. But he drew the line when Sirius started to give him a noogie. Immediately his invisible magical arms sprung to life and lifted Sirius off his back and held him in place a meter off the ground.

Harry crossed his arms and turned around smirking as Sirius was struggling in air, confused as to what was going on.

Sirius saw the look on Harry's face and realized this was intentional controlled magic. "How the hell are you doing this?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Harry smugly retorted.

"Yes, yes, I would like to know," Sirius answered while kicking his legs back in forth in the air.

Harry set his godfather down gently and shrugged. "I think that'll come up a little further into my tale. But I've only been in this

dimension for about a day, and I slept through most of that, so you get to go first.”

Sirius nodded and was smiling brightly. “Fair enough. First off though, you can relax. The war here’s not half as bad as it probably is for you.”

“You’d be surprised,” Harry offered.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yup.”

“Nice,” Sirius admitted thinking of all the friends he left behind. “Oh! Drinks! You want a beer?”

“Sure.”

While Sirius ran off towards the kitchen, Harry took a better look around the place. It looked like Moony’s kind of place, but you could tell there was a lot of Tonks’ influence with some of the brightly colored shelves. There were quite a few pictures of Tonks, some with Remus, some without, and even a few with people that Harry realized were his parents of this dimension. Some of the ones of Tonks and Remus were from when Tonks was frighteningly young, but Harry couldn’t deny the happiness in their eyes.

One picture immediately caught Harry’s eye and he picked it up to examine it closer. The two people waving in the back were undoubtedly, James and Lily Potter, but the two people in front, Harry realized, were what could have been his brother and sister. Harry doubted he’d managed to have an older sister or reddish brown hair, so he got the feeling the Harry Potter of this world died a long time ago.

“Am I dead, Sirius?”

“I hope not,” Sirius came back and handed Harry a beer. “Oh... yeah. In this world, you died Halloween 1981.”

“And you?”

“Your loving, caring, valiant godfather tried to hold off Voldemort and protect you, but he was killed moments before you did that night.”

Harry sipped his beer wondering how he felt about that. “That was twenty-five years ago, wasn’t it?”

Sirius grinned as he sat back on the couch and put his feet up on the coffee table. “Feels like only fifteen, if you ask me.”

“Fifteen?” Harry asked. “Are you telling me the Ministry obliterated the ten years you spent in between worlds in the Kingdom of Sensual Pleasure?”

Sirius looked at Harry in surprise and wonder.

“Someone took their gullibility potion, I see,” Harry victoriously muttered.

“That’s not fair,” Sirius argued realizing he may not have spent a decade in a place Harry may have made up. “Because for all the good those Unspeakables did, I still think they obliterated me.”

“How’s that?”

“Alright,” Sirius decided. “So you saw me dueling my cousin, right?”

“More like mocking her and not taking-”

“Yes, yes, that’s right,” Sirius interrupted. “Not my finest moment. Anyways, she hit me with that blood freezing curse that sent me flying into the veil.”

“Blood freezing?” Harry repeated. “Is that what it was?”

Sirius nodded. “Nasty bugger. Very dark because untreated or countered it’ll kill you in about five minutes. Paralyzes you immediately and just slowly gets colder and colder. I saw Moony holding you back as I fell into the veil. It all went black for me then. Next thing I know, I’m waking up in a hospital bed in a new dimension. They tell me I’ve been unconscious and healing for three weeks. The

Unspeakables informed me that they interrogated me with veritaserum.”

“You don’t remember being interrogated?”

Sirius shook his head. “They said I was real messed up but able to talk. I don’t know. I don’t remember. But they have been a damn sight better than the Ministry back in our world. Set me up with a full nutritional regiment to get me back to pre-Azkaban health, including some expensive mind healing cheering potion treatment, all on their tab. It’s why I’m still a little doped up now. Got three more days of progressively weaker doses.”

“Expensive cheering potions?”

Sirius shrugged. “I didn’t understand it, but there’s no denying the end result is a sexy beast.”

“You don’t remember anything of your time in the Exit?”

Sirius shrugged. “The Unspeakables told me I probably moved through time not just into a new dimension.”

“They’re wrong,” Harry retorted. “You were probably stuck in between dimensions for just shy of ten years.”

“How do you figure that?”

“The day you showed up in this dimension was the day I activated the Exit back in ours.”

“You know how to activate it?”

Harry shook his head. “Not really, but I’ve been studying the damn thing for four months.”

“Bloody hell, Harry! I just realized you jumped into the Veil! What the hell were you thinking?”

Harry looked a little ashamed at the return of the over-protective godfather attitude. “It wasn’t intentional. Besides we’re getting

sidetracked. The Ministry here fixed you up, drugged you, may have obliterated you, and then what?"

Sirius took a long drink and answered. "I'm a free man, in a new dimension, with absolutely nothing to my name. While I was still healing and staying in St. Mungos they asked if I wanted anyone to come see me. I asked for Moony. I hadn't even considered the possibility that your dad might have been alive."

"Or me?"

"Last I saw you, you had enough problems. Anyways, Moony came to visit me and got the abridged story of my life. Tonks came to visit almost as much and she knows it all too. When the Mediwitch said I could go, Moony said I could always stay with him. Considering he bought this flat with the money he inherited from my death in this dimension, I figured I'd take him up on the offer. Some nights I'll crash on Tonks' couch, but yeah. That's been my life so far."

"Sirius?" Harry asked curiously. "What about James and Lily? You haven't talked to Prongs?"

Sirius pouted and didn't look Harry in the eye. "I met him, but that pillock is nothing like the James Potter that was my best friend."

Harry held back a smile at Sirius' childish behavior. "How is he-"

"He doesn't even like pranks!"

Harry bit his lip at how outraged Sirius was. "That complete bastard."

"He came over with his son, *James, junior*," Sirius grumbled. "I was all set to surprise him and reveal to him who I really was, where I was from, the works. He didn't even know me, and he was telling his son about how an attitude like mine would never make it in the aurors."

"Well I don't think it would ma-"

"That's not the point," Sirius interrupted. "It's the way he looked down on me just because Moony and I were goofing around. Moony thinks he was probably the same James I knew up until that Halloween."

“So he doesn’t know?”

Sirius shook his head. “He thinks I’m some cousin of this world’s Sirius Black.” Sirius frowned and sipped his beer. “Of course he’ll probably figure the truth out when you meet him.”

Harry was watching his godfather. “Are you... *jealous*?”

“Well I just got you back,” Sirius pointed out. “And you’ve got the chance of a lifetime to meet your parents.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“I missed you,” Sirius whined. “And now that I’ve met the monstrosity he’s become, I miss Prongs too.”

“Monstrosity?”

“He’s everything we swore never to become.”

“A Death Eater?”

“No,” Sirius said with distaste. “Worse. He’s a mature adult. A cautious, careful, responsible person who lost his sense of humor and got a stick jammed up his-”

“Egads Padfoot,” Harry stopped him. “I think you’re getting a little ahead of yourself starting up negotiations with bizarro Prongs over joint custody visits with me. Do you even *want* to stay in this dimension any longer?”

“As opposed to going back? Or looking for a better alternate dimension?”

“Damn,” Harry cursed. “I never even thought about looking for another one.”

“Wait, so you know how to get back?”

Harry shrugged. “I was going to suggest the two of us jump into the Exit and see where it takes us.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Boy you really have unraveled the mystery of that thing, haven't you?"

Harry realized this plan would fall under the stupid category and grimaced. "Not to mention you missed out on the fun of that ride."

"It's that pleasant?"

"Probably the worst form of magical transportation I've encountered and I've hated just about all of them, so that's saying something."

"You think maybe you'd want to stay here?" Sirius asked hopefully.

Harry winced a little. "There's a Voldemort here. There isn't one at home. He's kind of a pain in the ass."

"But there isn't a Boy-Who-Lived here. Nor a dangerous but innocent Azkaban escapee either. I know for a fact they're both pains in the arse."

"We're broke. We have absolutely nothing."

"I'm working on a home, and something tells me we'd be able to get by."

"What about our friends back home? You've got family too."

"Who are all already convinced I'm dead, and apparently have been for ten years. I mean I know you'd be starting from scratch, but on the plus side, you would be *starting from scratch*. No stares, no preconceptions, no ulterior motives, no one will have a clue what that scar on your forehead is from."

Harry was rubbing his chin in thought. "I really don't have any idea what jumping into the Exit will do or where it will take us."

"Why are we even having this conversation then?" Sirius declared. "As far as this world's Voldemort goes, I say fuck him. Don't even give him a second thought."

"I really can't find it in me to care about him," Harry admitted in slight shock. "I suppose he did kill us in this dimension, but by the same argument we may have never been able to come here, if he hadn't."

"Exactly," Sirius agreed before thinking about what Harry said. "What?"

"It's possible that we came to this particular dimension because our counterparts were gone, meaning that just about any dimension we can get to will be one where we were Death Eater fodder," Harry explained. "Maybe."

"Why?"

"Well I mean, maybe we can only be here because our other bodies are dead."

"You've crossed a gateway to a new dimension and you're thinking about the *limits* to what's possible?"

"Okay fine, whatever, I thought you were trying to convince me to stay."

"Hey, you believe whatever you want and if it works for you," Sirius said with an exaggerated shrug. "All I know is it's a lot harder to pick up chicks who've spent a decade thinking I was the Dark Lord's favorite and a psychopathic killer. Even then sometimes the ones I could pick up aren't exactly the safest way to spend an evening."

"Good point, Padfoot," Harry nodded. "We should definitely base this decision on where we're going to get the most play."

"Well, if you were willing to use your fame," Sirius argued, "then maybe I can see-"

"I was being sarcastic."

"So are you up for staying here?" Sirius asked. "You could get to know your parents."

"Now they're a selling point?"

"No, but I figure a pitiful little orphan boy who never got a chance-"

"Bite me, Sirius. And don't be so melodramatic and jealous. The James and Lily Potter of this world are a middle-aged married couple that had to bury their infant son 25 years ago. Meeting them won't tell me hardly anything about *my* parents, two people who died so I could live. And now I have to placate your fragile ego despite the fact that I just chased you, my *real* godfather who did inadvertently die to protect me, across dimensions."

"Whoa now! You don't get to trip and fall into the veil claiming you chased after me."

Harry was smiling brightly getting the chance to just bicker back and forth again with Sirius. "Why do you think I cared so much about the Exit and spent the last few months studying it?"

Sirius grinned back. "Fine, if you *chased* after me, then I died a bloody hero protecting you, not *inadvertently*."

"I'll get started on your medal right away. Getting hit with a blood freezing curse directly in front of the Exit because you were taunting your cousin sounds like at least an Order of Moron, Second Class."

"Second Class?" Sirius demanded. "What do I have to do to get a First Class?"

"Stay dead," Harry smirked.

"Ouch," Sirius chuckled. "Merlin it's good to see you, Harry."

"You're not going to hug me again, are you?"

Sirius stood up threateningly. "No, I'm going to get another beer. Ready for your next?"

"Sure," Harry agreed handing Sirius his empty bottle. When Sirius reached the kitchen Harry's eyes were drawn to the picture he'd set down. "Hey Padfoot, you never mentioned anything about Lily here. Or their kids."

"I met James Jr. just briefly," Sirius called out. "Seemed like a nice enough kid. Didn't care if I called him Jimmy, though the pillock was as annoyed by that name as he used to be back in school. Seeing you now though, I mean you've got Prongs' hair more, but you don't look like him near as much as you used to. James Jr. looks more like his dad than you do."

"How old is he?"

"Seventeen I think," Sirius answered handing Harry another beer. "He's finishing up his sixth year now. Moony figures he's a shoo-in for Head Boy. Come to think of it, were you Head Boy?"

"I didn't go to Hogwarts for my seventh year," Harry explained. "Had more important things to do."

"What?" Sirius gasped. "I can't believe Dumbledore would let you get away with that."

"Dumbledore was dead by then," Harry flatly stated. "And you haven't finished telling me about the Potters of this world. Lily? The girl's name?"

"Sarah Potter, twenty years old, studying healing and apprenticing to Madame Pomfrey at Hogwarts. Lily's teaching Muggle Studies there. I've not met either of them, but Tonks and Moony insist they're both delightful people. Of course they think the same thing about the anti-Marauder. Now your turn. Go."

"Wow," Harry slowly drawled. "The warmth of the family I never knew is overwhelming in your descriptions. But if that's how we're going to play this game. Let's see fifth year, Department of Mysteries, you died. Dumbledore told me the prophecy that night. Pretty crappy night all around. Sixth year, learned a little about horcruxes and Voldemort. Dumbledore got killed by Snape-

"What!"

"Yeah, *Snivellus*," Harry agreed. "Some cocked-up plan where Dumbledore sort of made him do it. But things went to hell in a hand basket after that. Me, Ron, and Hermione ditched school to track

down the horcruxes so that Voldemort could at least be theoretically killed. Some good times, some bad times, a lot of studying, took our NEWTs, but six years later all three of us survived and we'd pulled it off. Voldemort was dead for good, I'd killed a number of the more pesky minions along the way, and the rest were easy enough for the Ministry to round up. Since then, the last couple of years have been peaceful and well... boring to be honest."

"No, no, no," Sirius said shaking his head. "You don't get to gloss over *everything* like that. I need some details."

Harry sighed. "You're really going to force me to relive some of my worst memories?"

Sirius stared at Harry and saw a mixture of amusement and a little bit of genuine apprehension. "Dammit. Fine. I'll get more stories from you as I can dig them out. But give me something at least. Killing Voldemort, how'd that feel?"

Harry took a big drink of his beer and carefully considered his words. "Truthfully? It felt fucking fantastic. Every other time I've been responsible for a death or had to take a life I've felt sadness and anger at the situation. But killing him was better than grabbing the snitch from right under some prick's nose. I felt alive more than I ever have. It was disgusting, gory, messy, and hurt like hell, but to kneel over what was left of his body and to watch it burn was amazing and cleansing and therapeutic and blissful. There really aren't words for the complete and total sense of righteousness I felt. I won, he lost. I lived, he died. And I did it without stooping to half of the shit he did."

"Damn," Sirius whispered watching Harry's little monologue.

"What?"

"You looked a little scary there."

"Might be because I am a little scary."

"Damn."

"What now?"

"I just realized you're not going to be able to leave this world's Voldemort alone."

Harry shook his head. "No no. I'm more than happy to leave him alone. This world's Voldemort hasn't done anything to me."

"Besides murder you as an infant?"

"The Voldemort who crapped on *my* life has been dealt with. Maybe there's a dead baby Harry with a score to settle with this Voldemort, but right now this particular Harry couldn't care less."

"And what happens when you start to care about the people in this dimension?"

Harry sighed. "We'll burn that bridge when we get to it. But if we're starting from scratch, then we're not carrying any old grudges."

"Sorry, I still hate Wormtail and Bella."

"If this world's James seems so different, why's it so hard to believe others might be even more different?"

"But Harry..." Sirius moaned.

"Fine, I hate them too. I'm just saying this Voldemort's done nothing to us, Harry and Sirius the dimension travelers, so I have no desire to have anything to do with him."

"Us?" Sirius grinned. "I'm automatically included in your inevitable quest for vengeance?"

"Everyone I give a damn about in this dimension so far is in this room," Harry shrugged. "I'm grateful to the Unspeakables, Moony, and Tonks for taking care of you, but yes, us. And as low-key as this world's Voldemort has been, there stands a decent chance our paths will never cross."

Sirius just laughed at Harry, making no attempts to calm down.

Harry pouted silently and drank his beer.

"Whatever happened to Peter?" Sirius asked softly before adding louder, "Or Bella?"

"Dead and dead," Harry said. "That's one of the nastier memories."

"Feel up to sharing that one?"

"When's Moony or Tonks getting home?"

"Moony's off work at five and apparates home, so right around then. Tonks' schedule fluctuates a bit more, but usually checks in on me before six."

"You want to go get us something a little stronger and I'll tell you this one?"

Sirius agreed without question and hopped back towards the kitchen to fetch the firewhiskey.

"First thing you should know is the prophecy," Harry yelled down the hall towards Sirius.

"Either must die at the hand of the other?" Sirius called back. "That the one?"

"Yeah. How'd you know that?"

"Same prophecy here," Sirius explained as he poured two small glasses of firewhiskey. "Only people think it's about Neville. Or it used to be."

"Neville? Used to be?"

Sirius took a small sip of his firewhiskey and lay down on the couch. "Long story. Yours first."

Harry nodded and began. "There was a line in the prophecy about *he will have power the Dark Lord knows not*. The moment Peter and Bella died was the moment the Dark Lord found out a little about that power."

"Is this that thing where you lifted me up and held me there?"

Harry smiled and sent an invisible arm towards his godfather.

Sirius yelped rubbing his shirt. "That's awesome! You have got to teach me how you cast a wandless nipple twisting curse."

"I doubt I'll be able to because that wasn't a spell," Harry said with a shake of his head. "Not exactly."

"Well it sure smarts like one," Sirius said tenderly pushing on his chest.

"After we'd taken our NEWTs," Harry explained. "I needed to focus my studies and wanted to get really good at a field or a style of dueling. I'd heard my mum was pretty impressive at charms and my dad at transfiguration. I'd seen Dumbledore using transfiguration in a duel and it was... it was on a whole different level."

"You transfigured my nipple?"

"No, transfiguration I was decent at, probably as good as Hermione, but it would've taken years to reach even McGonagall's level of mastery. No, after a few days of musing I decided I wanted to master the summoning charm. I'd always been pretty good at that one and I wanted to see how far I could take it."

Sirius was mumbling in confusion to himself. "You summoned my nipple?"

"First I learned it silent, then wandless. After that silent and wandless both was a piece of cake and within just a couple weeks I could summon with only a thought, no hand motion, no movement, no words."

Sirius was impressed listening to Harry.

"After summoning I figured I'd try banishing. Took a bit of work, but pretty soon I could change a light bulb without ever getting off the couch, or even looking up."

Harry grinned at his godfather. "I could completely control nearly all physical aspects of my immediate environment. The more

complicated things got the more focused I had to be but it was fun searching for limits. Distances took a lot more control and tired me quickly. After a while we asked Professor Flitwick for advice on directions to improve my talent for this particular branch of charms.”

Harry chuckled. “That little bugger was squeaking and chirping with joy. He couldn’t believe the level of control I had and it was his idea to take a look at the magic being cast. Are you familiar with any oculamagi spells?”

“Yeah,” Sirius said pulling out the wand Tonks had given him. He cast the spell and asked, “What am I looking for?”

Harry cast the same spell and saw their bodies were softly glowing indicating they were wizards. “Can you see the magic glowing around my body?”

Sirius nodded before jumping back in surprise as a ghostly magical hand shot out from Harry’s body straight towards him. It stopped just before Sirius and grabbed his beer before he could spill it.

“Careful there Padfoot,” Harry grinned. “You almost spilled your beer.”

“What the hell is that?”

Harry had extended his usual half dozen arms and they were all floating gently in the ambient waves of magic. “These are what my magic manifested due to my constant combination of summoning and banishing charms.” One of his extended arms tweaked Sirius on the nose and patted him on the back.

“I’m not sure if there’s a limit to the number of arms I can call up, but I did extensive training keeping six of them always up.”

“You’ve got some extra arms,” Sirius said. “Did you really need to train yourself how to use them?”

“I’m still figuring out uses for them,” Harry said and pushed himself up into the air with three of them.

Sirius could see them lifting Harry in the air, but it was weird seeing only the magic without anything physical behind them. He could see how it appeared Harry could hover at will.

Harry swiftly and smoothly held his physical arms out and pretended to fly in the air towards Sirius stopping just before him. His magical arms extended as he arced backwards away and landed gently right in his seat. "In most duels, I don't even get hit with a spell," Harry added as suddenly six nearby objects began hovering protectively around him each held in magical arms that overlapped and crisscrossed as they floated.

"Damn," Sirius admitted canceling the oculamagi spell on his eyes. "Without seeing the magic it looks even more impressive."

Harry set all the items back where they belonged and let his magical arms dissipate. "And they saved my life when I was captured and held by Death Eaters."

"Bugger," Sirius admitted pouring himself a little more firewhiskey.

"Draco fucking Malfoy," Harry spat the name out, "put Dobby under the *Imperius* and forced the house elf to slip me a Draught of Living Death. I woke up chained in a magically warded cell. Three days of listening to a few of the idiots spew their usual rubbish, shoving me around, spitting on me, and trying to act superior. But it was clear that I was to be saved for their Master. Finally, Bellatrix put me in magic inhibiting cuffs and led me towards a small meeting room.

"To this day, I'm still slightly curious at what the Dark Lord was going to say but I never gave him the chance. As soon as she led me up to his horribly clichéd throne, I saw the two other Death Eaters already standing by him were Lucius Malfoy and Wormtail. She was about to hand Voldemort my wand when I made my move.

"The magic inhibiting cuffs stop magic channeling out from your hands and wrists but my invisible magical arms were free. And all of my magic had woken up ready and waiting as soon as I got out from the wards of that cell. Voldemort reached out to take my wand from her when he picked up on my magic in the air and stopped short. He looked me straight in the eye right as all six of my arms grabbed their

targets and pulled. Three simultaneous cracks echoed around the room as Bellatrix, Lucius, and Peter's heads twisted violently. They all fell to the ground dead from their broken necks while I just stared at Voldemort."

Harry took a large gulp of firewhiskey. "I felt a little sick at the sound, but I saw fear in Voldemort's eyes." Harry shrugged and finished anticlimactically "Then I grabbed my wand, found a broom, and alternated between blocking spells and throwing objects at Voldemort. I took quite a few wrong turns, but eventually escaped."

"Fuck a little scary," Sirius whispered to himself. "You're a lot scary."

"On a completely unrelated side note, if you ever happen to try apparating while wearing magic inhibiting cuffs, you should know that you'll splinch your hands off at the wrist."

Sirius laughed out loud. "Totally unrelated, I'm sure."

"The best part, aside from taking out those three, was Voldemort got a lot more cautious and his attacks slowed down to a trickle." Harry took another drink. "It was when I got back that I found out Voldemort had been busy in the three days he had me locked up."

"That doesn't sound ominous at all," Sirius pointed out in an effort to ease the tension.

Harry sighed tiredly in remembrance. "He drew the aurors to Azkaban in a bit of misdirection and attacked personally in Hogsmeade, during a Hogsmeade weekend."

"Oh," Sirius winced at the thought of students.

"Thing is, you remember the DA?"

"Rebellious little study group you started up, sure."

"Well, after me, Ron, and Hermione didn't return to Hogwarts a few members took it upon themselves to keep the group going, one of those being-

“Holy crap! Ginny?”

Harry looked at his godfather in surprise. He was about to answer affirmatively when he realized Sirius wasn't even looking at him.

A soft familiar voice spoke up from over Harry's shoulder. “Hi Sirius.”

Harry closed his eyes not even wanting to look up. “Aww... bugger.”

CHAPTER THREE

"I really thought you might have moved on."

"Oh Harry," Ginny greeted lightly reaching down to kiss him on the cheek. "When will you realize we're going to be together forever?"

Harry shuddered slightly at the chilling sensation of her lips on him.

"You're a bloody ghost!" Sirius exclaimed as his mouth finally caught up to his brain.

Ginny smiled at Sirius and perched herself ethereally on the armrest of Harry's chair. "I'm in the seventh year of my death."

"And you look great," Sirius admitted with a grin.

"Sirius!" Harry groaned. "She doesn't need any encouragement."

Ginny struck a pose and pushed her ghostly chest out. "You can't beat a Killing Curse for preserving beauty and avoiding disfigurement. It's even better than a basilisk stare."

"Hogwarts robes always did it for me," Sirius admitted grinning brightly at her.

"Whoa," Harry stood up quickly. "Back it up there, dirty old man."

"He's so protective of me," Ginny said with a saucy giggle.

"I'm not protective..." Harry stopped and refused to be baited. He turned to glare at the ghost when Sirius suddenly burst out laughing.

"Oh this is priceless!" Sirius snickered.

"I'm glad my life amuses you," Harry grumbled.

"I just realized she's anchored to you! She's going to haunt you for eternity!"

"We're destined to be together," Ginny agreed with a smile.

"This isn't destiny, Ginny. You're dead. I'm alive and attracted to girls with a pulse."

"You'll come around," Ginny nodded with certainty.

"Maybe a necromancer will come around," Harry mumbled.

"Fate has taken us across the boundaries of our world together. We're clearly soul mates."

"We are *not* soul mates," Harry argued. "I think I would have felt it, if my soul mate had died. Actually wouldn't I die if my soul mate died?"

"No," Sirius cheerfully interjected. "You're Harry Potter."

Harry growled at Sirius.

"The Soul Mate-Who-Lived," Sirius added before slapping a hand over an invisible poking. "Oww! My eye! Dammit Harry, that really hurts."

"You were protected by the magic-less properties of that cell, Harry," Ginny said shaking her head. "We've been over this numerous times and you refuse to see reason."

"You died while he was being held captive?" Sirius asked curiously.

Ginny nodded happily. "I wasn't able to draw on his strength. It's the only explanation for what happened."

"Wait a second," Sirius exclaimed. "I just realized I was right! Ginny's alive and well in this dimension, and here her ghost is. You *don't* have to be dead there to reach an alternate dimension."

"But she's dead," Harry pointed out jerking his thumb towards the ghost.

"You said they had to be dead in the new dimension, and Ginny is definitely not dead here, last I heard at least." Sirius paused and turned towards the ghost. "Then again you just now showed up. Why is that? Ginny here's not dead, is she?"

Harry sighed and grumbled. "She's a young ghost and wasn't that smart to begin with."

"Hush," Ginny snapped before answering Sirius. "I doubt my counterpart is dead. My afterlife varies depending on my love's mood. Oh! This must be how we're supposed to be together. I'll rejoin my spirit with my counterpart's body so that we can live happily ever after!"

Harry ignored the ghost and argued with Sirius. "It still isn't two matching live people in the same dimension so my theory holds true."

"No," Sirius disagreed. "You said our counterparts had to be dead to get to that dimension. You've just proven that's not true if one of us is dead and even that may not matter at all."

"You really want that Order of Moron First Class, don't you?"

Sirius grinned unrepentantly. He turned to Ginny and tactfully asked, "Hey! Were you pregnant with his kid? Is that why you're anchored to him?"

Ginny looked surprised for a moment and rubbed her ghostly belly. "I... I never thought of that."

"We never had sex!" Harry added, believing this to be relevant information.

Ginny shrugged. "But we kissed a lot."

Harry poured himself a little more firewhiskey having had this conversation many times before.

"So what happened when your soul mate was unable to provide you his strength?" Sirius asked Ginny with a grin, knowing it would rankle Harry.

"Here it comes," Harry mumbled walking towards the kitchen not wanting to hear this story again. "Don't forget your shovel."

Ginny watched him walk away sadly. "He still doesn't know how to cope with my death."

Sirius bit his lip. "I can see that."

"Anyways," Ginny happily segued. "I didn't know it at the time, but Harry had been kidnapped and was being held prisoner by the Dark Lord. He doesn't talk about it much, but I'm sure whatever he may have told you wasn't half as bad as it probably really was."

Sirius nodded. "I'm familiar with my godson's gift for underestimation, though it's nice to see he's grown more confident and even proud of some of his accomplishments."

"And hotter too!" Ginny added.

"He gets that from me."

"You are looking surprisingly good, aren't you?" Ginny said after giving Sirius a brief inspection. "But I only have eyes for my Harry." Ginny sighed happily, looking down the hall into the kitchen.

"Anyways?"

"Right," Ginny recalled where she'd left off. "So it was early March and the first Hogsmeade weekend since the winter holidays. We were all eager to get outside the grounds and may have been a little too lax in our *constant vigilance*. I was walking to Madam Puddifoot's to ask her where she bought her cherubs—you know, to get a jump on next year's Valentine's Day plans for my sweetie—when we spotted some Death Eaters destroying Dervish and Banges."

Sirius just nodded, thinking Harry probably wished it had been Madam Puddifoot's getting destroyed.

"It was my seventh year, and I was leader of the DA. I sent two students to run back and shepherd everyone to the safety of the castle, while all capable wands were to follow me. I kept asking myself the question, 'What would Harry do?' We couldn't let the Death Eaters destroy Hogsmeade, so we decided to try and keep them busy until reinforcements from the castle could arrive."

"I gathered up all of my Gryffindor courage, strengthened my resolve as the Chosen One's predestined soul mate, and stepped out from behind our cover. That's when we first saw the man from my nightmares walking calmly out of Dervish and Banges just as the structure collapsed. The Dark Lord Voldemort himself was there."

Sirius could hear Harry's mumbling and grumbling from the kitchen and didn't think there would be a happy ending to this tale, particularly considering it was being told by a ghost.

"Tom looked genuinely surprised to see me standing proudly with twelve members of the DA behind me. I remembered how Harry led by example, teaching me not to fear the Dark Lord, and I ordered Voldemort to leave."

Sirius couldn't stop the laugh that escaped from him. He hurriedly covered his mouth at Ginny's angry stare and urged her to continue.

"Seeing as how we didn't react the way the Dark Lord expected, he wasn't sure how to deal with us. He lazily held his wand and asked, 'Do you not fear me?'" Ginny said with her voice deepened and eyes narrowed in concentration, demonstrating her best Voldemort impression.

"Fixed in my convictions, I confidently answered 'No!'" Ginny sighed and admitted softer, "But the effect was lessened by Owen Cauldwell raising his hand and admitting, 'I kind of fear you' at the same time as my declaration.

"Voldemort announced that he'd honor that honest fear with a quick and painless death. Next thing I knew a bright green Killing Curse was headed straight for Owen.

"I was wondering what was taking my sugar-bear so long when I realized what I had to do."

"Oh no," Sirius mumbled under his breath.

"I thought about nothing but my love for Harry and stepped right into the path of the curse. I held my wand firm and just as the death curse was a meter away I shouted 'Love Shield!'"

“Oh *no*,” Sirius muttered staring at the ghost that enjoyed embellishment a little too much.

“Sadly my attempt to reflect the Killing Curse back at the Dark Lord was unsuccessful, though I’m proud to say it did provide my snookums with the necessary protection to defeat the Dark Lord.”

“Hey!” Harry exclaimed marching back in from the kitchen. “We had a deal on no more snookums! And there’s no such spell as Love Shield. Even if there was, the incantation certainly wouldn’t be *Love Shield*.”

“Lovus Shieldus?” Ginny mused aloud.

“Maybe Lovio Shieldium,” Sirius suggested.

Harry stared at the ghost and his godfather in exasperation. “You’re both purebloods. Don’t either of you know Latin at all?”

“If it’s not in a family motto,” Sirius admitted with a shrug. “Although I think I should know the Latin word for *love*...”

“I never had any interest in learning Latin,” Ginny commented. “Hermione would probably know.”

“Spermatozoa!” Sirius declared triumphantly. “That’s Latin for love. Or something close to it. I think.”

Harry slumped back in his chair, not even caring that he just swung his arm straight through Ginny’s incorporeal body. He rubbed the bridge of his nose thinking that there were some things best left as mysteries.

Sirius watched Ginny staring at Harry all googly-eyed. “So no luck on reflecting that Killing Curse? Or surviving it?”

Ginny shook her head. “It hit me and then it all went black. I found out the rest later when I appeared by my very sad little Harry bear.”

“What was the rest?” Sirius asked curiously. “Or do I not want to know?”

Ginny glanced at Harry and silently requested permission.

"He probably doesn't want to know but go ahead," Harry said nodding at Ginny.

"Obviously we don't have first hand information," Ginny explained. "But Voldemort killed the twelve other members of the DA."

Sirius winced.

"Oh it gets better," Harry said with a weak laugh.

"Voldemort then animated their corpses and they marched the path back to Hogwarts," Ginny continued.

Sirius winced again.

"Headmistress McGonagall saw them in the distance and thought they were alive and being escorted to safety by some inhabitants of the Forbidden Forest." Ginny paused to make a face of disgust. "It was just some thestrals chewing on a couple of fifth years and licking up the blood trailing the group."

Sirius winced but was reminded they'd missed lunch.

"And so who does just about everyone blame for this tragedy?" Harry ruefully grinned. "Obviously it's the fault of the kidnapping victim, who at this time was still locked in a magic-less cell."

"Well it certainly doesn't sound like you did anything to help them," Sirius pointed out.

"I didn't know it was happening and I kinda had my own problems to deal with."

Ginny softly frowned. "The vast majority of parents did make Harry into a bit of a scapegoat."

"Vast majority," Harry grumbled. "They all did. Your parents included."

“They lost their baby girl,” Ginny argued with a pout. “And I think they were jealous that I chose to spend eternity with the love of my life rather than my family.”

“The Weasleys blamed you?” Sirius asked skeptically.

Harry shook his head. “Not outright or anything. They defended me from all the editorials calling me dangerous and a bad influence, but... it was a lot more awkward the few times I’d visit the Burrow, especially when ghost girl here came out to play.”

“How did the Prophet and its collectively minded readership make this little leap of logic?”

Harry shrugged. “I told the DA not to fear his name. That he was just a wizard who went about as bad as one can go. And despite the fact that it had been a year and a half since I’d even been to a DA meeting, according to the public I’m the one who convinced students they were soldiers, told them that they were old enough to stand up to Death Eaters, and I’m the one who led them to a slaughter.”

“I said I was sorry,” Ginny mumbled looking ashamed.

“I know,” Harry admitted. “I should have been a bit clearer in that fearing a made-up name is silly, but fearing an extremely powerful ruthless dark wizard is just common sense.”

“Ahh,” Sirius nodded. “Wizards aren’t too good with that stuff.”

Harry looked at Sirius in confusion.

“Common sense, I mean,” Sirius added. “Your mother always told me that instead of common sense, wizards got magic. Which actually explained quite a bit,” Sirius said thinking of the people that got the most magic including various Dark Lords and Albus Dumbledore.

A loud crack from by the front door announced an arrival by apparition.

“Moony?” Sirius called out curiously.

"I tell you, Padfoot," Remus called back. "Some muggles get so worked up and angry at me. Like it's my fault they can't..." Remus stopped as he entered his living room and spotted the ghost of Ginny Weasley, a young man he couldn't quite place, and Sirius grinning at him, clearly a little inebriated.

Remus closed his eyes and counted to ten. When he opened them all three people were still there, smiling and waving at him.

"Please tell me you didn't kill Miss Weasley," Remus begged of his houseguest.

"Remus," Sirius proudly introduced. "I would like you to meet my godson, Harry Potter."

Remus turned to look at Harry closer. "Bugger me. He's even got that scar you talked about."

"Sirius," Harry whined turning towards his godfather.

"Hey," Sirius defended himself. "It's pretty damn hard to talk about our dimension without *that* story coming up. And Moony, before you freak out this is the Ginny Weasley of my original dimension, who is bound for eternity to her soul mate, Harry."

Ginny curtsied towards Remus, while Harry just groaned.

"I didn't think one soul bonded could die and the other live," Remus stated.

"Thank you," Harry boisterously agreed. "It's because she's *not* my soul mate. Most of the time I can barely tolerate her."

"Of course I didn't think you could get hit with a Killing Curse and live either," Remus added grinning like a Marauder. He walked over towards Harry extended his hand to shake, "Pleased to meet you."

Harry forced a fake smile and shook Remus' hand. "You're a barrel of laughs already."

Remus nodded towards Ginny. "I thought you looked a bit younger, though your counterpart here could easily still fit into her school robes."

Remus brushed Sirius' feet off the couch and poured himself a drink settling down in the cleared space on the couch. "So are we celebrating or mourning or both?"

"As it turns out," Sirius happily explained while Harry seemed a little put out at the lack of reaction from Remus. "Harry, here, began working on the veil back in our dimension just a few months back. He's the one that triggered it to spit me out when it did."

"Really?" Remus grinned, sipping his firewhiskey. "And now you're here to clean up your litter?"

"We've decided we're going to stay," Ginny announced gleefully.

Harry saw Remus looked worried that he might be running out of couches and guest beds real soon and explained, "I still don't know exactly how I triggered it two months ago, but the Exit changed significantly on our side. I find it hard to believe that it's merely coincidence Sirius got spit out on this side the same day."

"And you?"

"Yes well," Harry fidgeted a little. "I've been working on the Exit and had a little accident yesterday."

"You just got here yesterday?" Remus inquired. "Sirius was healing for several weeks."

"I could've located this lunkhead sooner, but it was quite tiring crossing dimensions and then escaping from the Unspeakables."

"You what?" Sirius yelped unaware his godson was a fugitive.

Harry smirked. "Not all of us are so helpless and willing to submit to memory charms and veritaserum."

"Wouldn't they know you're here and be looking for you?" Remus asked curiously.

Harry shrugged. "I'm hoping not, but it's definitely possible."

Another crack from the entryway indicated another arrival. Tonks' voice carried into the living room. "Sirius? You here?"

"Yup, in here," Sirius called back.

"Pretend I just subtly inquired about a blonde veela-like woman associated with Lucius Malfoy," Tonks yelled back, still out of view. "The Department of Mysteries is in a right tizzy because they think she came from the veil yesterday."

Harry grinned brightly at Remus and Sirius inquiring looks.

"A blonde woman?" Sirius repeated.

"Yeah," Tonks called back. "Apparently she took out three Unspeakables but did a crap job of memory charming them." Tonks walked into the living room just as she finished and stopped curiously. "Err... hello?"

"Tonks," Sirius waved at the stupidly grinning young man. "I'd like you to meet my godson, Harry."

"Hi," Harry grinned at her.

"Bugger me," Tonks whispered doing a double take at all the smiling faces. She only now noticed the ghost hovering behind Harry. "Ginny!"

"Hi Tonks," Ginny said with a small wave.

"It's not this dimension's Ginny," Remus assured her. "It's theirs."

"What the hell did you do, Harry?" Sirius asked curiously. "Come through the veil polyjuiced as a hooker?"

Harry shook his head and gave Tonks a long look. "You're not going to arrest me, are you?"

“Doubtful considering the way those two boys are smiling,” Tonks answered pointing to the two Marauders on the couch.

Harry nodded. “I only had about forty-five seconds so I did a pretty slick memory alteration, substituting my presence for a large-breasted blonde woman, and my questions about Sirius for questions about Malfoy.”

“Veela-like my arse,” Tonks grumbled.

“I followed it up with a clumsy brute force memory modification,” Harry explained. “I didn’t have time to check what sort of alarms I triggered, and I figured that the mess of trying to clean out the second memory charms would further hide the first ones. Especially since the first ones were only alterations leaving no blanks.”

“You did that in forty-five seconds?”

Harry nodded pleased with the apparent success of his ploy.

“Hey!” Sirius exclaimed. “This is perfect! Tonks can be hunting you down the same way Kingsley ‘hunted’ me.”

Tonks had heard about Sirius’ escape and life on the run and was considering the idea.

“We can feed you whatever clues we want to make up,” Sirius continued.

Tonks agreed the idea had merit. “It does get me out of work anytime I want to just be in public with you,” she said looking at Sirius, “under the guise of you being uniquely suited to spotting someone from your dimension.”

“That doesn’t sound very responsible,” Remus commented with a frown.

“Oh get off your high horse,” Tonks scolded pouring herself a drink. “These are the same idiots who won’t even let you get in a job in the wizarding world.”

“Yeah, what do you do?” Harry asked curiously looking at Remus. “You said muggles get worked up and angry at you.”

Remus saw Sirius was going to laugh and immediately defended himself. “They give me three days off every full moon, and it’s easy work.”

Sirius was still snickering.

“It pays for this place,” Remus said with a clear undertone reminding Sirius that he had no home or money in this dimension.

Harry saw Tonks was rolling her eyes seated across from Remus and Sirius. “What is it?”

“Are you familiar with computers?” Remus asked looking at Harry.

“Vaguely,” Harry said having sat in front of one for about an hour at a muggle library.

“I’m a senior consultant in client relations for technical assistance,” Remus explained. He saw Harry didn’t follow that at all. “Tech support on the phone,” Remus clarified.

“Oh,” Harry caught on. “I had no idea you knew so much about computers.”

“Padfoot,” Remus scolded noticing Sirius was about to burst.

“He doesn’t,” Sirius exclaimed mirthfully. “He doesn’t know anything about computers.”

Harry watched Remus smother a very Marauder-like smile.

“I know about computers,” Remus countered. “I just don’t know anything about fixing them, per se.”

“So what do you do?”

“Tell people to reboot,” Remus shrugged. “And if that doesn’t work, they have to cover shipping costs to mail it back to us.”

"That's it!" Sirius chuckled. "That's all he does."

"No," Tonks jumped in. "He plays a lot of computer games too."

"Careful there, young lady," Remus warned with a smile. "I'm not above breaking out some very incriminating photos."

Tonks knew exactly which ones he was talking about. "You wouldn't."

"That's right," Sirius jumped in and looked over at Remus. "You mentioned something about a spanking?"

"I don't want to hear this," Harry interrupted, while Ginny smiled next to him. "I kind of do."

"And you were trying to make me feel guilty about responsibility," Tonks grumbled.

"There's no honor in the work I do," Remus said looking at Tonks. "You took an oath and wanted a career where you could help people, where you can do the right thing. Your responsibility is-"

"Whatever *Dad*," Tonks grumbled and stuck out her tongue.

Harry wondered how close this dimension's Tonks and Remus were, because when Harry left Tonks was still constantly wanting to be near Remus and holding his hand. These two seemed to have a much more blasé dynamic and Harry wondered when the honeymoon had ended. "So Tonks, how long have you been Auror Tonks-Lupin here?"

Tonks was counting in her head. "Umm...I've been an Auror fourteen years now."

Harry shook his head. "I meant how long have you had the Lupin tacked on to the end of your last name?"

Tonks looked at Harry in confusion. "Since I was eight."

Harry gasped and snapped his head over at to look at Remus' proud smile in abject horror.

Sirius saw Harry's pained face and explained, "Her parents and godparents were killed the same night we were, Halloween 1981. Guardianship then would have gone to me as the only relative her parents acknowledged. I left everything to Remus, so rather than risk her being sent to the Lestranges or Malfoys, Moony here got custody legally through the muggle system and raised her on his own."

Tonks shrugged seeing Harry looked struck speechless. "I remember my real parents, but I liked calling Moony my Daddy and took his last name. Most people think Tonks is my first name which suits me just fine. Sirius already told us that my parents lived in your world. Why?"

The ghostly Ginny was staring open-mouthed at Tonks and Remus completely speechless while Harry fell to the floor unable to breathe he was laughing so hard. Every moment Harry looked up to begin speaking, he would collapse again and slap his hand on the floor.

"I don't think my parents dying is really all that funny," Tonks added feeling a bit annoyed.

"What's your problem, Harry?" Sirius asked. Seeing Harry was still no help, Sirius looked towards the ghost and asked, "Ginny?"

Ginny licked her ghostly lips and calmly explained, "Your name is Tonks-Lupin in our world too."

Sirius furrowed his brow. "What do you..." He quickly spun around to stare straight at Remus and sharply pointed an accusing finger. "You!"

Harry was nearly unintelligible but in between his racks of laughter he added, "I think you call him Daddy there too."

Remus looked just as confused before he realized exactly what the addition of his last name implied. He snarled angrily, "That filthy pedophile!"

Tonks was horribly lost now and looked towards her father. "Who?"

"Me!" Remus exclaimed poking himself in the chest.

“What?” Tonks asked again, unable to even consider the cruel truth staring her right in the face. “What does that have to do with my name?”

“You’re my victim!” Remus explained far louder than necessary.

Harry was still snickering but composed himself enough to add, “I believe the term we’ve been using is wife, but that works too.”

“Oh god,” Tonks wheezed turning green without using any metamorphmagus skill. “That’s disgusting!”

“I know!” Remus said struggling to even look his daughter in the eye.

Sirius was clearly just as amused as Harry. “When did this happen?”

“Less than a year after your accidental pirouette,” Harry answered. “But they didn’t get married until after Voldemort was gone.”

“That’s- that’s- that’s so wrong,” Tonks mumbled fearfully. “I mean, Moony’s my *dad*!”

“Less than a year?” Remus repeated with a pained face. “That’s practically cradle robbing. Don’t I even know the age rule?”

“I know you do,” Sirius stated. “You taught it to me when that third year grew those huge-”

“Vera Helbig!” Remus agreed. “Same thing happened here.”

“And you asked me about the rule,” Sirius exclaimed spinning around to point at the queasy looking Tonks. “Just a couple months before I left. Merlin, I thought you had the hots for Harry. That’s why I encouraged special circumstances.”

“Really?” Harry inquired wagging his eyebrows at Tonks.

“No offense Harry,” Sirius explained. “But life expectancy for you was more often measured in weeks than years.”

“Would someone care to explain this age rule to me?” Ginny interjected curiously.

"Half your age, plus seven," Sirius and Remus said in unison repeating the universally accepted measuring stick dividing healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Remus continued, "Rounding up for good measure. Meaning when I was 36, no wait, 37, the youngest I should date is 25, or 26 if you round up. That's why Tonks at 23 should've been off limits."

"There are a few other reasons I should've been off limits, *Dad*," Tonks added with a shiver.

"I need a drink," Remus said, shaking his head.

"Me too," Sirius agreed pouring large glasses for everyone.

"I need a memory charm," Tonks added, only half joking.

"Me too," Remus seconded.

"If it makes you feel any better," Harry said waiting until the other three were taking drinks. "Tonks was pregnant when I left."

Sirius spurted up his firewhiskey in laughter while Remus and Tonks both painfully swallowed the liquid in their mouths.

"Why would that make us feel better?" Remus asked giving Harry a dirty look.

Harry shrugged. "Well it made me feel a little better to tell you."

Tonks just rubbed her temples. "You know until that, I'd managed to convince myself our counterparts may never have..." She stopped herself from saying anything more.

"Of course you have," Ginny helpfully added. "Why even before my death, Tonks was telling me all about the benefits of werewolf strength and how frisky he'd get, the closer to the full moon it was. Hell, you guys even managed to synchronize your cycles."

Sirius and Harry found themselves briefly as horrified as Tonks and Remus were, before catching each other's eyes and cracking up.

Ginny as the calmest one in the room continued. "Something about the wolf being able to smell-"

"Stop!" Remus yelled. "Stop! For the love of Merlin, stop!"

All four people and a single ghost descended in silence, broken only by the occasional snicker or shudder.

Harry realized this was the sort of cruel joke that was going to last a lifetime and felt pity on the two Lupins for now. "Moving forward, what's the plan for tonight?"

"I don't know," Sirius said as Tonks and Remus seemed to be a little shell-shocked still. "Tonks? Any luck?"

"What?" Tonks asked.

"Any luck on locating us a Lord?"

"Oh sorry," Tonks said. "Actually yeah, the head of the Zabini family is willing to hear from you."

"And as far as we know, they're not Death Eaters, right?"

"They've almost always stayed neutral on the divisive issues," Tonks explained. "Chris is the only one I know at all and he's a nice enough bloke."

"Why are you looking for a Lord like Zabini?" Harry asked curiously.

"Trying to get the old house back and maybe a couple galleons too," Sirius explained.

"And Zabini has the house keys?"

"It's old family politics," Sirius explained. "But basically when the Sirius of this world died at the same time you did, you were his designated heir, and you, as a one year old, hadn't designated anyone so the Black family as a whole, was headless."

"The Black family?" Harry asked curiously.

"It's how a lot of the old pureblood families operate," Sirius explained. "There's a family vault, which in families as competitive and heartless as mine, doesn't usually have much money. It does have some family heirlooms though, including the magical deed to the *family* manor."

"Grimmauld Place?" Harry clarified.

Sirius nodded. "When the family's headless, the vault and manor seal up. And the family ring goes back inside the family vault. It's a bunch of outdated mularky, but if I can get another Lord to vouch that I'm the new Lord Black, the goblins can get me in the vault for the purposes of seeing if the ring will accept me."

"No sacrifices or bathing in blood?" Harry grinned before adding, "And you know Grimmauld Place isn't all that sealed up. It's where I crashed last night. Dusty as hell and Kreacher's even further off his rocker in this dimension."

"You've been there?" Sirius asked in surprise.

Harry nodded. "Though it looked like I was the first one in a long time."

"I didn't think you'd have been able to even get near it without the Black family ring," Sirius said seeing Tonks and Remus looked as clueless as him.

Harry twisted a ring on his finger making it visible. "This one?"

Sirius' eyes widened. "Bloody hell, Harry! You're Lord Black."

"Umm... I think I would've remembered something like that."

"No," Tonks agreed. "You are."

"Harry," Sirius explained, rubbing his forehead. "If that ring didn't accept you as Lord Black, it could've killed you. Or at least really hurt."

Harry huffed. "That miserable little bastard. Kreacher gave it to me and told me it would make the wards I was trying to put up actually work."

"Well, yes," Sirius agreed. "It would do that, but knowing Kreacher I think he was hoping it would kill you."

"He was," Harry agreed. "He went from smiling to frowning as soon as it flashed when I put it on. So this is why I was able to get into Grimmauld Place."

"Well I guess we don't need Lord Zabini for anything," Sirius told Tonks. He turned to Harry, "And we're not homeless anymore."

Harry smirked. "Oh, so now you're crashing on your Lord's couch?"

"Couch?" Sirius grinned. "I've got seniority. The Master bedroom is mine."

"Why don't we let the ring decide?" Harry offered twisting it back into invisibility.

"That's brilliant!" Sirius agreed. "That's the ring from our dimension. This dimension's ring might still be in the vault."

"Two Lord Blacks?" Remus asked. "Is that even possible?"

"I got Harry involved, so we got a decent shot," Sirius explained.

"Well then you still need a Lord Zabini or someone to vouch for you," Tonks pointed out.

"We got a Lord Black right here," Sirius said pointing to Harry. "He can vouch for me, but he can probably open the vault just fine himself."

"Lady Black," Ginny said, trying the name out. "It suits me."

Harry sighed and thought back to a certain portrait. "Well I always did think of Mrs. Black as a long-dead insanely annoying harpy."

Ginny scowled at Harry punching her fist through him, giving him a literal cold shoulder.

“Aww good old Mum,” Sirius recollected. “Thank Merlin she didn’t love me the way a father loves his daughter.”

Complete, dead silence followed as everyone stared at Sirius. He couldn’t take it and cracked up. “This is going to be great.”

CHAPTER FOUR

"A halfbreed! A mudblood! A bad Master!" Kreacher shrieked excitedly. "Oh good Master! You even brought your own dead muggle-lover!"

"Kreacher," Harry snapped trying to shake the elf loose. "Stop humping my leg. That's an order."

"I'm so sorry, Master," Kreacher pleaded. "Kreacher will do better. Do you want Kreacher to put away your things?"

"You rotten little crap-bubble," Sirius chuckled at the insane elf. "We're not his *things*."

Kreacher looked confused and turned towards Harry. "Master?"

"They aren't my things," Harry instructed still uncertain how he felt like dealing with Kreacher. "Remus and Tonks are friends and guests. Sirius is not the same Sirius you used to know. And Ginny... well I guess she is my very own dead muggle-lover."

Ginny's cheeks brightened in a ghostly blush and whispered towards Tonks, "Harry said I'm his lover. He's so cute when he's possessive."

"He is kinda cute," Tonks admitted conspiratorially.

Ginny glanced between Tonks and Harry. She leaned in towards Tonks, "You know now that you're not married to your dad, you could morph to look like me and go out with my Harry. I'd be fine with that." Ginny was doing a fair impression of Dobby, she was nodding so fast.

Tonks saw Ginny was a little too enthusiastic at the idea.

"I wouldn't mind," Ginny explained. "I could even help you with all the bits and parts that you can't see. Stupid ghost robes."

"Maybe later," Tonks said silently adding 'or never.'

Tonks noticed how dust covered the kitchen and back entrance were. "Hey Harry, you mind if I go exploring?"

“Knock yourself out,” Harry said waving towards the entry hall and living room. As Tonks left the room, Harry whispered to the two Marauders, “I’m curious if the troll leg umbrella stand is in this dimension.”

A loud crash and clang indicating the Auror tripped was followed by a shout of “Son of a-”

Tonks’ yell was interrupted by a familiar screeching voice. “Mudblood! Filthy mudblood whore!”

“Guess so,” Harry grinned.

“Home sweet home,” Sirius exclaimed with a wistful smile.

“A warmer welcome you’d be hard-pressed to find,” Remus said.

“Shut up, you bloody hag!” Tonks yelled from the front hall.

“You’re going to die, you filthy mudblood whore!”

“You hear that Moony?” Sirius said with a playful elbow. “You’re the proud father of a filthy mudblood whore.”

“Bad Master?” Kreacher questioned curiously at this new attitude from his other Master.

“I’m not a Sirius Black you’ve ever met before,” Sirius explained to the little elf as he walked out of the kitchen.

Sirius reached into the entryway and spotted the offending portrait. “Hello *mother*.”

The portrait stopped her incessant shrieking at Tonks and looked at Sirius in wonder. “Can it be... *Sirius*?”

“Sirius, as in your dead son who secretly pledged himself to the Dark Lord and has only just now been reborn under the Dark Lord’s awesome power?” Sirius offered seeing the hopeful smile on his painted mother’s face. He chuckled happily, “No.”

Mrs. Black huffed. “You clearly have the disappointment’s attitude.”

"There's the pet name every child wishes their mum would call them," Sirius retorted with a sigh.

Harry followed behind his godfather and added, "For what it's worth, one time she called me the disappointment's disappointment."

Mrs. Black frowned. "When did I...?"

"You didn't," Sirius said dismissing the confused portrait. He looked towards Harry inquisitively. "I hope you responded in kind to my dear old mum's portrait."

Harry shrugged. "I did piss on her."

Sirius couldn't help it and burst out laughing.

"In my defense I was drunk at the time. She didn't bother me too much after that."

Sirius tapped his chin in thought. "I wonder if Dad knew it was that easy."

"Old Master knew," Kreacher answered immediately. "Old Master did it quite-"

"Kreacher!" the portrait hissed indignantly.

"Mistress?"

"Yeah," Harry interjected. "We really didn't need to know that."

"Would you like to punish Kreacher?" the elf asked hopefully.

"No," Harry answered without pause. "But I would like to see this place cleaned up some. You are capable of cleaning, aren't you?"

"Oh yes Master," Kreacher cheered enthusiastically. "I shined and polished all the muggle torturing tools. Even put fresh batteries in some of the muggle ones."

"Really?" Tonks perked up curiously.

“Down girl,” Sirius jumped in. “Not in front of your father this close to his time of the mo-” Sirius let out a squeak and turned to run as Tonks and Remus both attempted to curse him.

“Why don’t you work on cleaning the rest of this place, Kreacher, starting with the kitchen,” Harry stated firmly. He saw the confusion on the elf’s face and added, “Think of this entire house as one big muggle torturing device.”

“Yes Master,” Kreacher accepted happily and popped away to begin scrubbing.

Harry walked over towards the fireplace and stuck his head under the hearth. “You guys know if this is connected to the floo network?”

“Doubt it,” Tonks answered. “No one’s used it in twenty-five years, so even if the monthly upkeep is covered, it’s still cycled far enough out of use that you’ll probably need to get it reconnected.”

“We should definitely get it reconnected,” Sirius answered showing his face now that Remus and Tonks had given up chasing him. “But let’s set it to default deny.”

“You know,” Harry suggested. “I can put up a Fidelius charm for us.”

“You can cast a Fidelius?” Remus asked, slightly impressed.

Harry nodded. “It’s one of the charms I’ve gotten quite good at.”

“I’d rather not a Fidelius, if it’s all the same to you,” Sirius said. “We can ward it plenty, but we’re not exactly prime targets of the Dark Lord here. And I’d like to be able to bring home a muggle without dealing with too many questions.”

“Couldn’t you just memory charm them?” Harry asked, pulling the curtain across Mrs. Black’s portrait before she could start up a rant about muggles.

“I’d rather not,” Sirius explained with a grimace. “Something about bringing home a girl and ending the evening—or morning more likely—with a memory charm just feels a little like rape.”

"You don't rape her, I hope."

"No, of course not, it's just... it still just feels wrong. A violation of her rights or something."

"You're weird," Harry decided. "But even if you don't want a Fidelius charm, I still want to pick up some blank anchor stones."

"I don't have much money," Sirius began.

"You don't have *any* money," Remus corrected.

"Yes and that's not much now is it?" Sirius agreed. "So maybe we should hold off on the big magical purchases."

"Umm, if this dimension is anything like our old one," Harry stated. "They only cost about forty galleons for a set of eight and two discs. I've got that covered and it'd make me feel a lot better. I'd settle for four and one disc, if you're that worried about it."

"It's your money," Sirius said not understanding how anchor stones made Harry feel better. "If we're lucky there might be a set in the family vault."

"I know I'm the old man around here," Remus said. "But it is almost four in the morning and I've got to be up for work in three hours. You sure you want to stay here tonight?"

Sirius nodded. "We'll be fine. Get your beauty sleep, grampa. You look like you could use it."

Remus smiled seeing how much happier Sirius was now that Harry was here. "You guys are welcome to make breakfast at my place, but please don't steal everything from my kitchen."

"Yeah, I'm gonna head out too," Tonks said walking down the stairs. "This place is pretty big, which means you guys got a lot of cleaning to do and I need to make myself scarce. I wouldn't mind digging into some of those books in the—*Dammit!*" Tonks cursed as she once again tripped over the troll leg umbrella stand.

“Whore!”

“Painting!” Tonks yelled back at the portrait thoroughly confusing it. Tonks snickered seeing the curtain had flung open and Mrs. Black looked befuddled. “I’ll catch up with you guys tomorrow night.”

Sirius was chuckling after Tonks was gone, leaving the two dimension travelers alone. “She still trips over that thing every time.”

Harry was laughing just as much. “You know it’s cursed, right?”

“What?” Sirius looked at Harry in confusion.

“Oh yeah,” Harry snickered. “That umbrella stand is jinxed to trip her up.”

“No,” Sirius said doubtfully. “Really?”

Harry nodded. “I think it was something one of your cousins or maybe mother did to Andy, and Tonks inherited it from her mum.”

“Oh I bet Tonks was pissed when she found that out,” Sirius said thinking of all the times she’d tripped over it throughout the years.

“Who said Tonks ever found that out?”

“Mr. Black,” the old goblin grumbled as he looked up from his desk. “I hope you’re not here to waste more of my time.”

“Not at all, Elder Rahdoh, not at all,” Sirius said with a grin. “I’ve even brought my very own ancient Lord with me this time.”

“Indeed?” the goblin said leaning over to look at Harry.

“Harry,” Sirius greeted. “I’d like you to meet Elder Rahdoh the Moderately Sane, the Director of Ancient Family Affairs and occasional amateur singer. Elder Rahdoh,” Sirius turned and introduced. “I’d like you to meet my godson, Harry.”

The goblin saw the young man wave meekly and turned towards Sirius. "Mr. Black? You failed to recall that you had a godson who was an ancient Lord?"

"I couldn't find him until just yesterday and only then found out that he was an ancient Lord."

The goblin tilted his head down and was peering over his glasses at Harry. "And just what family are you the head of?"

"You don't have to know that," Sirius jumped in before Harry could answer. "Do you?"

"I suppose not," Elder Rahdoh agreed. "But for your sake I hope the magic accepts him."

"Not a problem," Sirius nodded immediately. "Magic is Harry's bitch. We just need you to take us there and invoke a test of nobility."

"Blimey Sirius," Harry blurted out. "You can't expect to pass any test of nobility."

"Irony isn't it?" Sirius grinned. "It used to be accepted that it was a test of the bloodline or purity but people from other families have been designated heirs, even muggle-borns, so they renamed it nobility."

Elder Rahdoh pressed a button and spoke some Gobbledegook into a magical intercom. A perfectly clear voice said something in Gobbledegook back and Elder Rahdoh sighed. "Well, let's get this over with so I can get back to work. I figure this will either work or you shall die. Come along."

Harry saw the smile on Sirius' face falter for a second as they got up and followed the old goblin out of his office and down towards a cart. The three of them fit into a single cart and they began the fast and bumpy ride down the track.

The wind was rushing in their ears, but Harry's curiosity got the better of him. "Elder Rahdoh, you said this will either work or he'll die. Do you have a preference which?"

Elder Rahdoh kept his hand on the lever and turned towards Harry and Sirius. "Well, there's a lot more paperwork if he dies," the goblin smiled wickedly. "But on the other hand, I wouldn't have to worry about seeing him again. So each side has its advantages and disadvantages."

The blunt honesty of goblins always amused Harry, almost as much as the overwhelming enthusiasm of house elves. He chuckled at Sirius' frown and Elder Rahdoh's complete indifference to them.

A few minutes later the cart slowed to a stop in front of a very different looking vault than Harry had ever seen. It appeared to look more like a cave with a solid, smooth block of onyx for a door. Two goblins were waiting on either side of the door, one of them leaning against the wall in irritation. Two large spikes had been crudely slammed into the ground in front of the goblins. Topping the obviously magical staffs were small chambers of constructed metal and clear glass resembling lanterns. Inside each chamber was a glowing ball of magic that arced within its confined space.

"I do not have all day," Elder Rahdoh grumbled urging them to hurry up.

"Harry," Sirius instructed. "You've got to stick your Family ring in the lower corner of that square on the wall. *Don't* stick it in the center."

"Why shouldn't I stick it in the center?" Harry asked walking over towards the carved wall that had etchings indicating where to place his fist.

The goblins exchanged curious looks, beginning to think they may get to watch an ignorant wizard or two die today.

Sirius saw them all visibly perk up and explained, "The center is for the Black family ring and it will simply open the vault. The bottom right is where acceptable ancient families can nominate others after the family goes headless."

Harry shrugged and pushed the ring onto the spot. "If you say so."

The vault suddenly became active and the two spikes in the ground began flaring up and sparking like crazy. Currents of magic were bouncing back and forth between the two magical conduits while the inky black onyx of the door rippled into a blurry clear haze.

Sirius took a breath and walked right through the magical current and his body began to glow and flicker on its own. He didn't even slow down as he walked straight through the solid wall and into the Black family vault.

Harry turned towards the goblins all watching curiously. "Am I supposed to leave my hand up here?" When no goblin answered, Harry sighed and propped his arm up holding it in place.

Sirius walked straight into the vault and saw everything was obscured from view other than a small pedestal with a ring box on it. He strolled right up to it and opened the box. "Yes!" Sirius cheered when he discovered there was still a Black family ring. Without hesitation, Sirius removed the ring from the box and slipped it over his finger.

Harry was watching the other goblins when his ring let out a flash of white light that reflected off the wall. "Whoa!" Harry exclaimed holding his arm still in place. "The magic's asking me for permission. What do you think, boys? Should I make him sweat it out?"

Elder Rahdoh had looked up at the flash of light and replied. "I've never heard of the sponsor being questioned. This isn't right."

"It's okay. This actually kind of makes sense." Harry explained before playfully yelling loudly, "Should I or shouldn't I?"

"Dammit Harry!" Sirius yelled out from inside the vault. "If I die, I'm going to haunt you and be even more annoying than-"

Harry encouraged the Black family magic to accept Sirius and effectively shut Sirius up as the ring molded to his finger, confirming him as the new Lord Black.

Sirius came skipping out of the vault and stopped just before crossing through the magical current again. "We're good!" he exclaimed, proudly showing off his new ring.

“Finally,” Harry said dropping his arm from where he was holding it.

Just as he did, the door to the vault rippled and became solid black. The two spikes of magic fizzled down to the beginning levels, and the two silent goblins wiggled them free from the ground in disappointment.

Harry stuck his ring in the center of the square and much to the shock of the goblins the door slid straight open revealing the contents inside.

“Cool,” Harry agreed pulling his hand away. He stuck it right back again and this time the vault door slid shut with a heavy clang.

“Let me try,” Sirius called out placing his ring where Harry’s had been. As expected the door slid open again. “That’s brilliant.”

The two goblins carrying the magical spikes walked away into the darkness of the tunnels, while Elder Rahdoh sat back in the cart to wait on the two still living wizards.

Sirius strolled over to a small chest and found it about a quarter full. “Nice. We got about... eight hundred galleons here or so. Give me your money pouch. I’ll fill ‘er up a bit.”

“Let’s take a couple hundred galleons each,” Harry stated tossing his pouch to Sirius. “That should be enough for some clothes and food and other immediate necessities.” He was looking through an old box of parchments. “Hey! Did you know we got a seat on the Wizengamot? And the Hogwarts Board of Governors?”

Sirius was stuffing handfuls of galleons into both his and Harry’s pouches. “Yeah, I remember something about that. Don’t remember who it was that was using them, but they’re probably not exactly in line with our ideologies. Go ahead and grab whatever you got that looks interesting. We’ve got a day of shopping ahead of us.”

The two Lord Blacks packed up everything they felt like taking and walked out of the vault. Harry put his fist over the center of the square and the vault door slammed down, sealing shut. They hopped into the cart and Elder Rahdoh began the journey back to the surface.

“So you are Lord Black,” Elder Rahdoh said looking at Sirius.

“Yup.” Sirius said bobbing his head up and down, resisting the inner urge to stick his head off the side of the cart and let his tongue hang out as they flew down the track.

The goblin turned to Harry. “And you are...?”

Harry smiled and answered, “Lord Black.”

Elder Rahdoh just sighed and went back to looking forward.

“Does this happen often?” Harry asked curiously at the lack of surprise from the goblin.

Elder Rahdoh shook his head. “I don’t think it’s ever happened before.”

“Aren’t you curious?” Sirius asked with a mischievous grin.

“Will it prevent me from having to do double the paperwork I now must?” Elder Rahdoh retorted at the two stupidly grinning wizards. He turned back to face forward as they remained silent. “I thought not.”

“Why are you buying a bottomless bag? I’ve got my satchel,” Harry said patting his man’s purse.

“Well that’s yours,” Sirius said. “We both need a lot of stuff and I don’t want to get our things mixed up.”

“Do I have cooties?”

“I want my own, okay?”

“Why not just charm a bag rather than paying the extra for a magical one?”

“Do you know *how* to charm a bag to be bottomless?”

Harry opened his mouth to answer when Sirius interrupted him and clarified. “I’m not talking space expansion charms that just make little

things bigger, but the proper ones where everything is easy to reach, cushioned, and protected.”

“Buy your bag, you big baby,” Harry grumbled. “Let’s hit Ollivanders next though. I want to pick up this dimension’s version of my wand if it’s there.”

Sirius nodded and got in line for the cashier.

“I’ll wait for you outside,” Harry stated, stepping out to look at the noon day sun. He was quietly watching the people walk by, completely oblivious to the nonchalant way a wizard was sneaking up behind him.

Harry couldn’t even identify the whispered word but the moment the spell washed over him, he immediately knew the word the man had said.

Imperio.

Harry was scolding himself for not having been more vigilant or aware of his surroundings. His magic was jumped and ready to attack, but he didn’t want to waste the energy it would take to snap the hold of the *Imperius Curse* blindly.

His confidence never wavered knowing with certainty that he could overpower the will of the caster. It just was immensely easier to do when you’re actually given a suggestion or command that you could respond negatively to. So far the man behind Harry had only cast the spell and was waiting for something else to happen before giving instructions.

Harry saw people continue on their way, completely oblivious to his predicament.

After two and half very slow-moving minutes through which Harry kept reconsidering just expending his energy and snapping the spell, Sirius finally exited the shop. He walked over towards Harry, glancing briefly at the man standing just behind Harry facing away.

“So when Ginny went away, is she just invisible and around us? Or does she actually go somewhere else?”

Harry just stood there pointedly ignoring Sirius.

“Harry?” Sirius repeated. “Are you even listening to me?”

Just as Harry had hoped, the caster of the *Imperius Curse* mentally ordered Harry, ‘Tell him to go away.’

‘That was a mistake,’ Harry mentally sent right back, snapping the hold of the curse instantaneously.

The wizard suddenly turned to Harry, who was spinning around to get a better look at his attacker. Before the man had even managed to fully draw his wand from his sleeve, both of his arms were jerked out to the side and his wrists were bent back snapping loudly as they broke. He yelled out in pain and Harry quickly cast a silencing spell over the wizard.

Sirius had drawn his wand and saw two other men apparate away immediately.

Harry was pleased to see how quickly Sirius reacted and petrified the silently screaming man. “Sirius, can you call the Aurors to come arrest this man for casting an Unforgivable on me?” Harry levitated him up and down an alley. “I’m going to get him out of sight so as not to disturb the people shopping.”

Sirius just watched Harry calmly follow the man around the corner and ran back into the shop he’d left moments ago. They let him use the floo to call the Department of Magical Law Enforcement who were going to be sending some Aurors within the minute.

Harry led the man away and pushed him up against the wall. He spun him around and ripped the sleeve off of the man’s robes and shirt, exposing the Dark Mark.

The man was in shock, pain, and was terrified, feeling helpless with two broken wrists. Harry didn’t seem to have even needed any effort to hold him in place, snap his bones, and reveal the Dark Lord’s

symbol. He could see the power in Harry's eyes and didn't even realize that his thoughts were running beyond his control.

Harry held eye contact and attempted to *Legilimens* the wizard. He found the man's name was Gordon Smith and that he was going to use Harry to destroy the post office. Two other Death Eaters were there with the same instructions.

Smith discovered what Harry was doing and expelled him from his mind, demonstrating an average talent at best for the mind arts.

Harry sighed and stunned the man, "You're supposed to pick someone at random, and you picked me. That's bloody hilarious."

"Harry," Sirius called out as he jogged down the small alley between buildings. "Alright?"

Harry nodded and saw two uniformed aurors following behind Sirius, looking alert as they took in the situation.

"I'm Auror Billings, this is Auror Anderson," the man said, introducing himself and the female partner with him. "You say a dark wizard cast an Unforgivable on you?"

"I don't know him well enough to call him a dark wizard, but he cast the *Imperius* on me about five minutes ago," Harry explained and handed Billings the wand that Smith had dropped. "Pretty sure it's the last spell he got off."

Billings accepted the wand and checked it using *Prior Incantato*. As indicated the last spell was an *Imperius Curse* and the ghostly effect matched Harry's appearance indicating he was the target.

"Both of his wrists are badly broken," Anderson stated, inspecting the downed wizard.

Billings could see the Dark Mark clearly on the man's arm and so far had no reason to doubt Harry's story. "Care to explain his wrists?"

"I didn't want him to attack me again. I have no idea how proficient that man may be at wandless magic and I didn't know if he had any portkeys with him."

"So you broke his wrists?"

"Is there a preferred response to being subjected to an Unforgivable?" Harry retorted looking at Auror Billings.

"Ahh Harry?" Sirius jumped in. "As Lord Black, I know you're always allowed to defend yourself in kind. So a clear attempt on your life like an Unforgivable, means you could kill him perfectly legally."

"You think I should kill him?" Harry asked glancing back at the unconscious wizard.

"Since he's stunned, it might be hard to convince the two Auror witnesses that you were defending yourself," Sirius felt like the obvious needed to be stated.

"Lord Black?"

"Yes?" Harry and Sirius both said turning to the Auror.

"Damn," Billings cursed. "I've got to call my boss in on anything involving the head of an old family." Billings cast a couple of spells on a small card he kept in his pocket.

"There's a mediwitch coming to deal with the suspect," Anderson explained. "Would you like her to check you out first, Lord Black?"

"Naw, I'm good," Sirius said knowing she wasn't asking him. "What about you, Lord Black?"

"People are really this anal over the pureblood and Lord crap?" Harry asked looking at Sirius.

Sirius nodded. "Might as well use it to our advantage, *Lord Black*. Now are you sure, you're okay?"

"I'm fine," Harry said nodding towards the confused Auror Anderson. Harry saw Sirius looking at him expectantly, waiting to be addressed. Harry shook his head. "I'm not going to call you 'Lord Black.'"

"You have to," Sirius argued back. "I've got the ring and everything."

"Wait, so you're Lord Black?" Anderson said, addressing Sirius.

Sirius nodded.

"We both are," Harry added. "Though I've got more experience at it."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised to see you here," a new voice jumped into the conversation.

Harry did his best not to stare at the man.

Sirius bit his lip, not having expected this. "Nice to see you too, Assistant Director Potter."

"Mr. Black," James Potter greeted tightly. "Unable to stay out of trouble, I see."

Harry could tell Sirius was uncomfortable and jumped in, "If you're here in an official capacity, I believe Lord Black may be more applicable than Mr. Black."

Sirius resisted the desire to cheer out loud and point in James' face.

James Potter turned towards Harry and was obviously sizing him up. He didn't seem to recognize Harry or have any idea why he felt so familiar. "And who might you be?"

"I'm another Lord Black," Harry answered more calmly than he felt. "And I don't believe we've met."

James was not amused. "Which one of you is the real Lord Black?"

"We both are," Sirius explained showing him his family ring while Harry made his visible and waggled his fingers at the Assistant Director.

"Lovely," James mumbled making no effort to hide his sigh. "How is this possible?"

"Why is this relevant?" Sirius retorted.

"I'm going to need to explain how there are two Lord Blacks in my report on this incident," James argued.

"You really don't like us, do you?" Harry bluntly asked.

"I don't believe the fact that you happened to have been born in a certain family means the rules should be different for you."

"What rules exactly are so different? A clearly marked Death Eater cast an Unforgivable on me. Should I not have defended myself?"

"My apologies, Lord Black," James said the name dripping with false sincerity. "Now if you're going to refuse to share with me just how there are two Lord Blacks, can you at least explain exactly what happened here?"

Harry could see Sirius was very irritated with confronting bizzarro Prongs, and proceeded to once again recount the details, beginning with feeling the curse wash over him and waiting until he was issued a command. He glossed over some parts indicating he simply used magic to restrain the wizard and break his wrists, not offering anything specific like the lack of spells required.

Auror Anderson left with the injured wizard and mediwitch while James and Auror Billings continued asking Harry and Sirius question after question.

"Are we ever going to get our shopping done," Sirius mumbled.

"Of course Lord Black," James said giving Sirius a condescending look. "I'm sorry the Department of Magical Law Enforcement consumed so much of your time. We will most likely contact both of you for the trial, and it's possible you will be required to testify."

"Come on, Harry," Sirius said beginning to walk away.

Harry turned towards them noticing James' eyes had widened slightly at his name. "We're done, right?"

James quickly composed himself and nodded. "Yes, we're done." He turned from them without even saying goodbye and apparated away.

Auror Billings nodded at Harry and followed after his boss with a soft pop.

"You think we can make it to Ollivanders without you causing another scene?" Sirius muttered in irritation.

Harry shook his head and fell into step with Sirius. "Boy you really don't like him, do you?" Harry said echoing his earlier comment.

"You couldn't tell what a pillock he's become?" Sirius snapped back.

Harry shrugged adding, "I'd never met him before."

Sirius paused realizing just what that statement meant and looked back at Harry cautiously.

"For Merlin's sake, Sirius," Harry grumbled hurrying towards the wandmaker's shop. "Don't waste the whole day pouting like a Malfoy. Your face might get stuck like that."

"I'm not pouting," Sirius pouted. "So what did you think?"

"I think... I think you're being a little unfair to him," Harry answered opening the door for Sirius to lead the way in.

"Whatever," Sirius grumbled. "All I know is the James Potter he was twenty-five years ago would be horrified at what he's turned into."

"Welcome," Ollivander greeted coming out from the back. "Lord Black and... Lord Black?"

"How do you do that?" Sirius said always getting a bit weirded out by Ollivander.

"We're wearing the rings, Sirius," Harry pointed out dispelling some of the old wandmaker's mystique. "And you need to remember that

twenty-five years ago he lost his son and best friend, another best friend stabbed him in the back, and the last remaining Marauder was forced to grow up and be responsible for his new eight year old daughter.”

“I know,” Sirius grumbled.

Harry turned and addressed the slightly confused older man. “We could use a couple wands, holsters, and some polish.”

“Which hand is your-”

“Right,” Harry and Sirius both answered in unison lifting their right arms up.

“Creepy,” Ollivander whispered softly.

Harry ignored the idea that he was creepy to Ollivander and added, “I was looking for perhaps a phoenix feather wand in Holly, maybe eleven inches or so. Got anything like that?”

“You know it is not the wizard who chooses the-”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry nodded. “Call it a hunch that a wand like that will choose this wizard.”

Ollivander harrumphed not particularly liking the lack of respect he was receiving, and unable to unravel the mystery of these two Lord Blacks. “That is an unusual combination, but I do happen to have a wand fitting that description.” Ollivander turned and went into the back.

Harry turned to Sirius. “I’m not saying James should be our best friend, but considering what he’s been through I guess losing his sense of humor isn’t surprising.”

“This is most disconcerting,” Ollivander stated returning from the back. “But I’m sorry to say I do not have the wand you seek.”

“No?” Harry asked curiously. “Did you sell it?”

Ollivander shook his head. "I doubt it."

"What do you mean?"

"The wand is not where I last recall it being, but I haven't thought about it in many years."

"Did you lose it?" Sirius asked curiously.

"I do not lose wands, Lord Black," Ollivander stated with certainty. "I suspect I was the unwilling recipient of a memory charm. Had you not asked for that exact combination, I may never have thought about that wand again. Factoring this in, it is possible I did *sell* the wand, but I doubt it."

"You want some help seeing if there's a block that can be removed or a charm broken?" Harry asked.

"No thank you, Lord Black," Ollivander stated turning down the offer of help. "If there's anything recoverable I should be able to locate it myself. Now, was there anything else I could do for you?"

"I suppose I'd still like to purchase whatever wand you have that best suits me," Harry answered.

"Same here," Sirius said pointing towards himself. "For what it's worth, my last wand was twelve inches, driftwood, with a dragon heartstring."

"Curious," Ollivander whispered inspecting Sirius closer. "That is the exact same wand Sirius Black used to have. What did you say your name was again?"

"Sirius Black," he answered happily.

"Just a coincidence, I'm sure," Harry added with a firm nod.

"Of course," Ollivander said giving Harry a long look. "So says the *other* Lord Black who was inquiring about the brother to the Dark Lord's wand."

“Huh,” Harry said slapping his leg in surprise. “I didn’t know that. Small world, isn’t it?”

Ollivander harrumphed and began going through the many wands he had in stock. For the next hour he kept handing new wands to Sirius and Harry to try, all with varying degrees of failure and on occasion slight success. The process continued until Harry felt a strong connection with a wand he tried out. Not as nice as his proper wand, but far more compatible than any others he’d waved that day.

Sirius found it hilarious that big, bad Harry was now the proud owner of a dainty little nine inch ash wand with a unicorn hair from a particularly vain male unicorn’s mane.

Sirius’ amusement lasted about ten minutes, until an 8 and a quarter inch wand made of driftwood and unicorn tail hair produced some musical, pink sparks when he swished it.

“Not a word, Harry. Not one word,” Sirius warned as he paid for his wand and holster.

Harry was just smiling widely staying silent.

Ollivander was under no such threat and explained, “Your connection produced very rich, though high-pitched tones. That wand should be exceptional at delicate work.”

Harry made no effort to hide his snort. He glanced at Sirius and turned to Ollivander, “Is my wand not so suited to... *delicate* work?”

“Harry,” Sirius said warningly.

Ollivander shook his head and explained, “Your combination is less precise but capable of channeling more magic easily.”

“And I didn’t get any pretty sounding delicate tinkling bells,” Harry said with a straight face, pointedly not looking towards Sirius.

“No, Lord Black, you didn’t,” Ollivander said while completely aware of how Sirius was taking the reminders. “It takes a special person and

special circumstances to get any sort of positive response other than sparks.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Sirius grumbled already halfway out the door.

“In case you need a reminder,” Harry said to Ollivander. “You have a memory charm on you. And if you find anything out and feel up to sharing, I’m interested in what happened to that wand.”

“Good day, Lord Black,” Ollivander nodded as Harry chased to catch up with the once again pouting Sirius.

“Shopping sucks Slytherin’s balls,” Sirius grumbled into his drink.

“I hear that,” Harry agreed munching on his fish and chips. “I don’t know why I thought Hedwig might be in this dimension waiting for me to buy her. I’m going to miss that mothering little bird.”

Sirius shrugged. “I think the owls we got are going to be fantastic. I can’t believe no one had bought Smokey.”

“Your owl has gas,” Harry reminded. “I’m not sure there’s a lot of demand in the market for owls with digestive difficulties.”

“You’re just jealous,” Sirius said haughtily. “And where did you come up with that name for your new owl?”

“He picked his own name,” Harry said. “I was just making up names until he responded to one. And if he says his name is Kid Killer McGee, who are we to say it isn’t?”

“Kid Killer McGee,” Sirius repeated. “That’s almost a better name than Smokey.”

“It *is* a better name. We got some clothes, owls, wands, personal things, a little bit of food,” Harry recounted. “Next we should get a clearer idea of what we already have at Grimmauld Place before we work on redecorating.”

“Remember I’d like it to pass for a muggle place on the surface so that we can entertain guests from all walks of life. Confine the obviously magical stuff to a few rooms.”

“We’ll have to do something about the portrait of your mother then,” Harry said finishing the last of his food.

“Did you ever figure out a way to remove her?”

Harry shook his head. “Never tried too hard. Didn’t really need to.”

“Why not?”

“Oddly enough it was Dudley who provided the simple and often overlooked solution.”

“Dudley?” Sirius exclaimed. “I wouldn’t think you’d want to have anything to do with the Dursleys.”

Harry shrugged. “Yeah well, Dudley gave the constables my name when he got arrested one time, and I was intrigued enough to bail him out.”

“What’d he do?”

“He went streaking with some of his mates at a West Ham match,” Harry grimaced. “He was the ham.”

Sirius shuddered having remembered what Dudley looked like in Harry’s third year. “So what did Dudley do to my dear sweet Mum? Punch a hole through her or something?”

Harry shook his head. “Nope. He just moved a book case in front of her.”

“Oh,” Sirius said anticlimactically. “I guess that would solve the problem, wouldn’t it.”

“You know where we’re meeting Tonks and Moony?”

Sirius nodded. “It’s a muggle bar about a block from where Tonks’ apartment is. Decent place with some friendly regulars.”

Harry stood up and vanished his garbage. "Let's go unload our spoils and change into muggle outfits." Harry saw Sirius was still sitting there with a frown on his face. "What is it now?"

Sirius sighed. "Just seeing you use your proper wand makes me want mine that much more."

"There's nothing wrong with your new wand."

"I don't care about that," Sirius retorted. "Well not too much. It's just, as good as this wand feels compared to the others I've used, I can still tell it's not as perfect a match as my proper wand is."

"What happened to your original wand?"

"The Unspeakables said my clothes were destroyed and there wasn't one with me when I came out the veil."

"What about in this dimension? Do you know where that one is?"

Sirius nodded while chewing on the inside of his cheek. "Yup."

"Where?"

"Same place it's been for a quarter of a century, Godric's Hollow."

"Ahh," Harry said in understanding. "And you couldn't get it back unless you made your peace with bizzaro Prongs, and convinced him of the truth of who you are."

"I suppose if you wanted to do things the hard way," Sirius explained as his face split into a bright grin. "But personally, I think it's going to be much easier to simply steal it."

CHAPTER FIVE

“So now you’re both Lord Black?” Tonks asked in between sips.

“Yup!” Sirius and Harry cheered in unison.

“That’s going to get so fucking old.”

“Hey!” Sirius whined.

“What’s next? You’re not joking, you’re Sirius?”

“He was probably thinking it,” Harry agreed.

“And I suppose you shaved this morning, but you’re already Harry?”

Sirius stretched his waistband out and peeked down the front of his pants. “What if I’m seriously hairy?”

Remus cringed swallowing the beer in his mouth. “Can’t we have one evening without your kibble or bits coming up?”

Harry didn’t even pause before asking, “Does half mast count?”

Remus groaned while Tonks muttered, “As if one of them wasn’t bad enough.”

“Hey there’s actually two of everyone to keep straight from our point of view,” Harry argued.

“Yeah,” Remus recalled. “How’re you doing with that? Because Sirius still likes to break down sniveling like a little baby.”

“One time!” Sirius insisted. “One time a bug flies in my eye.”

“A bug no one could ever locate,” Tonks added.

“It must have flown away,” Harry mockingly suggested.

“Thank you,” Sirius agreed. “That’s exactly what it did.”

"Although come to think of it," Harry said scratching his chin. "I think it flew back *in* your eye when I found you yesterday. Pesky reappearing bug."

"Bugger off," Sirius grumbled with a smile.

Remus sighed in the silence that followed and looked at Harry. "We're doing our best not to encourage those sorts of puns."

"By ignoring him though, he takes it as a challenge and will try to come up with worse puns," Harry pointed at Sirius. "See? Even right now, his warped little mind is searching for something that will provoke the right reaction. Something about the bee in your bonnet? The bug stops here? No ifs, ands, or bugs about it?"

"Oooh, good one," Sirius grinned.

"For *crying* out loud," Tonks jumped in, emphasizing her own addition to the pun-fest.

"Not you too," Remus groaned.

"I could say that was accidental," Tonks smiled. "Bug I won't."

Sirius nudged Harry. "Maybe you could teach Moony a buggle repelling charm?"

"This is why," Harry addressed Remus while pointing at Sirius. "This is why you have to rub his nose in it, right away. It's the only thing that works."

Remus was intrigued. "And just how would you rub his nose into a pile of bad puns?"

"Yeah," Sirius wondered. "How would you?"

Harry shrugged. "For something like this? I'd say just pinch him anytime he makes a pun."

"Oww!" Sirius yelped and clutched his ear. "That's not funny."

Tonks grinned and pinched Sirius too when he was looking at Harry.

"Oww!" Sirius yelled again.

"Huh," Remus said while considering the efficacy of this plan.

Sirius jumped up from his seat. "Dammit Harry! Leave my bum alone. It's too pretty for that."

"Sorry," Harry grinned unrepentantly. "Thought I saw a bug there."

Sirius growled.

"He was just trying to get a little revenge for you," Tonks sweetly argued.

"Before you somehow manage to lower the level of maturity in this conversation any further," Remus interrupted.

"I'm not sure that's possible," Tonks said.

"Shut up you fatherfucking traitor," Sirius snapped before slapping the back of his pinched neck. "Oww! Dammit Harry!"

"He took that as challenge," Harry demonstrated. "But now pinched and mollified, he's uncertain. He wants to curse me, but the potential of being pinched again is holding him back."

Sirius just narrowed his eyes at Harry. "*He* knows where you live. *He* knows where you sleep. And *he* is a Marauder."

"The Marauder name just doesn't carry as much weight as it used to," Harry commented warily noticing Remus looked as indignant as Sirius. "But that reminds me, what happened to Wormtail here?"

"Are we talking about Death Eaters again?" Tonks whined.

"Sorry," Harry shrugged. "Still trying to catch up with this dimension. We can talk about something else."

"He's alive," Sirius said answering Harry's question. "A wanted Death Eater and the Aurors know his animagus form."

“Fair enough,” Harry nodded. “So what are some more pleasant topics of discussion? Chudley Cannons still blow unicorn balls?”

“Juicy ones,” Tonks added. “But they’ve already won more games this year than last.”

“How many have they won this year?”

“One,” Remus answered. “By forfeit.”

“Some things stay the same,” Harry commented noticing Sirius was staring at an attractive brunette at the bar.

“Yeah,” Remus saw Sirius wasn’t even paying much attention. “Those brave few fighting the effects of evolution we can always count on. Right, Padfoot?”

“Right,” Sirius agreed absently before turning back towards the table. “Wait, what did I just agree to?”

“A duel,” Tonks answered. “The three of us against you.”

“Hey, that’s not a bad idea,” Sirius cheered.

“Really?” Harry asked curiously.

“Not you three against me,” Sirius corrected. “I was thinking you two against the Lords Black.”

“Ahh,” Remus paused and glanced at Harry. “You killed your Voldemort, right?”

Harry nodded.

“Yeah, that’s not happening,” Tonks answered.

“Just a friendly duel,” Sirius argued. “You can even start with Harry’s wand.”

“Hey,” Harry complained.

“You’ve got another,” Sirius muttered out the corner of his mouth.

“Good point.”

“No duels, no Voldemort, no Death Eaters, no Quidditch,” Remus interjected. “I want to get to know you, Harry. I never had the chance here. What do you do for fun? What are some of your hobbies?”

“I like Quidditch, but you already said no to that.”

“Do you play?”

“Not professionally, but I like to think that I could make a pro squad. Unfortunately, I dislike people too much to play for a crowd.”

“You hate people?” Tonks asked curiously.

“Only in large groups,” Harry clarified. “Specifically, large groups who told stories about me before I even knew magic was real. And seem to think the death of my parents was some sort of fairy tale happy ending.”

“They told stories?”

Harry nodded. “Ginny forced her dad to tell it every night when she was five.”

“It was when I was four!” The ghost suddenly appeared and argued. “And it was only every night for about six months.”

Harry jumped to block her from view, harshly scolding. “Ginny! Get the hell out of here!”

“Why?” Ginny frowned, having just appeared.

Harry peeked over his shoulder and whispered angrily, “Because this is a muggle bar.”

“I won’t drink much,” Ginny offered.

“No! Go away!” Harry whispered forcefully.

“Umm... Harry?” Tonks interrupted. “You know muggles can’t see ghosts, right?”

Harry snapped his head towards Tonks. "Ix-nay on the uggles-may."

"They can't?" Ginny shrieked. "All this time, you've-

"*Shh*," Harry hushed. "But they can certainly hear them, so shush!"

"Let her stay," Sirius urged. "The muggles can't see her, and she'll stay quiet, right?"

Ginny nodded with a grin at Sirius, keeping her lips sealed and silent.

"Need I remind you," Harry argued, "that while Sirius and I may have been dead for twenty-five years, there is another living breathing one of her walking around right now? She's a lot more likely to be recognized than either of us."

"I think in a *muggle* bar we should be pretty safe," Tonks said with a roll of her eyes.

"Alright, so you like Quidditch," Remus said redirecting the conversation back on track. "What else do you do for fun? Or do you have a job?"

"No job. I've had a fair amount in the bank from my folks and an award from the Ministry. I think they retroactively put a bounty on Voldemort to buy some good press, but," Harry shrugged. "It was free money."

"How much they pay for something like that?"

"Fifty thousand galleons," Harry answered. "They knew I'd turn it down, so they also awarded all the DA members a thousand galleons each, if I happily accepted the award at a ceremony."

"You'd just refuse fifty large like that?" Tonks asked curiously.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "I could've told you that."

"Of course now," Harry answered, "in a new world where I don't have any savings, I don't think I'd endeavor to be quite so noble if someone were to offer me free money."

“So no job, likes Quidditch,” Remus summarized. “Any hobbies? Maybe a special girl in your life?”

Ghostly Ginny harrumphed loudly, staring at Remus.

“Present company excluded,” Remus added at Harry’s exasperated look.

“Nope,” Harry answered. “No special girl.”

“You’re not a…” Sirius paused unsure if he should voice the last word.

Harry looked at his godfather curiously before realization dawned on him and he blurted out, “No! No, nothing like that. I mean I *have* done it before.”

“Really?” Sirius asked in surprise.

“Sure,” Harry nodded. “Lots of times. That was when I first realized if I was angry enough I could will Ginny away.”

“I didn’t want to watch that!” Ginny shrieked. “And yes, Sirius, *many* times.”

“Huh,” Sirius said shaking his head. “I never would have pegged you for that.”

Harry looked at Tonks and Remus who were both looking at Harry appraisingly. “So you expected me to be a twenty-five year old virgin?”

“What?” Sirius asked in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“Weren’t you asking me whether I was a virgin?” Harry said, and glanced over seeing Ginny nodding with him.

“No,” Sirius said with a bark of laughter. “I was asking if you were gay. And apparently your answer is no but you *have* done it before.”

“Many times,” Tonks helpfully added.

“No special girl,” Remus grinned.

Harry blinked. "Sorry Moony. I don't swing that way no matter how well kept your moustache is."

"There are other straight men with moustaches, I'll have you know," Remus tiredly pointed out.

"So in answer to your question," Harry said turning to Sirius. "Nope. I'm not. Never have been."

"Well there was-"

"Ginny, shut it," Harry warned pointing his finger.

"It counts."

"You want me to banish you?"

"Dennis apologized, or should I say *Denise* apologized?" Ginny stopped at the look on Harry's face and hurriedly floated over to hide behind Sirius. "I'll be quiet now."

Harry sighed and looked at the other three brightly smiling faces. "Don't ask."

"Can I picture it?" Sirius grinned happily. His grin faltered when Harry narrowed his eyes and Sirius felt a sudden painful poke. "Oww! My eye! Dammit Harry."

"You know, come to think of it," Harry continued ignoring Sirius' angry muttering. "Since we're staying, the history of that world is like a figment of our imagination with very little relevance here. So I think it's my turn to learn about this world."

"Fair enough," Sirius agreed. "What do you want to know?"

"I'm guessing Death Eaters are going to be unavoidable, but you mentioned something about Neville Longbottom?"

"The Chosen One," Tonks agreed. "After you were killed, the Order quickly moved to hide the Longbottoms away. It was known for years that the Dark Lord wanted to kill Neville Longbottom. Considering,

he'd gone out of his way to murder one baby born in late July of 1980, and was trying to kill the other, the story and prophecy eventually became common knowledge."

"And I take it Neville's not still in hiding?" Harry asked, hoping to avoid any uncomfortable questions.

Remus winced. "It was early summer of '87 when the contents of the prophecy became public. Knowing there was a savior in the form of a six year old growing boy, a lot of people wanted to help him. Whereas before he only had very limited contact with the wizarding world, that year he was inundated with birthday gifts: lots of weapons, cloaks, armors, books, that sort of thing. People assumed he was the next Dumbledore and when he was ready, he'd lead the fight to destroy Voldemort."

"I can empathize with the pressure," Harry wryly added.

"Thing is, no one knows what happened to him," Tonks continued. "March 21, 1988 he disappeared. Completely. No trace of him. No sign of his existence. Not even an indication whether he's dead. Just... gone."

"No one's seen nor heard from him since he was seven?" Harry clarified.

"Nope," Remus sadly answered as he took a drink of his beer.

"Nothing confirmed," Tonks corrected. "But there are plenty of unconfirmed accounts."

"Unconfirmed?" Harry asked askance.

"About a year after Neville disappeared, a wizard dressed in black, stood up to the Dark Lord and stopped him," Tonks explained. "Ever since then, it's been like Voldemort is on the defensive. Our spies say he's had several major plans fall apart before the Order even heard about them. Not quite as extreme as the way your first war ended, but before Neville's disappearance and after is like the difference between a war and a skirmish."

"It does seem sort of... cautiously relaxed around here," Harry added.

"A lot of people believe Neville got some special training and has been protecting us," Tonks continued. "They say he is waiting until he can defeat Voldemort before returning to his family. I'm not sure about that, but a lot of people have seen a wizard in black fighting off Death Eaters."

"As an eight year old?" Harry repeated, making sure he understood. "Do you believe that?"

Remus was hesitant but answered, "It's one of the nicer things to believe in, when the other options usually include Neville's death."

"If he's really the Chosen One," Tonks pointed out. "I mean what was the point of that prophecy for the downfall of the Dark Lord, if it got you killed and Neville killed too before anyone was marked, right? Neville being alive was the only possible option for it... well, until you-

"No!" Sirius said slapping a hand over Tonks' mouth. "We discussed this."

"I know," Tonks grumbled. "We swore the damn oath not to tell anyone, didn't we?"

Harry had a guess about this. "What's going on?"

Sirius never even considered keeping this from Harry. "In case it's escaped your notice, Harry, these two Lupins are members of the Order. And the knowledge that a Voldemort killer and prophecy-approved person is in this dimension might be kinda relevant to the Order."

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "I pretty much assumed that was unavoidable when we decided to stay here."

"Well I'm not ready to give up the hope that it's avoidable," Sirius insisted. "I made these two swear oaths to not divulge any secrets about your past."

“Really?” Harry said grinning brightly and earning small smiles from Remus and Tonks in return. “You guys would cover for me like that? You don’t even know me.”

“I know you well enough,” Sirius retorted. “And they’ve gotten to know me.”

Tonks shrugged. “It sounds like Voldemort was a lot worse in your dimension than here. He’d never dream of strolling down Hogsmeade openly murdering children.”

Remus nodded. “You’re the son of a James Potter. I’ll protect you even if it’s from Dumbledore.”

“Does he know about you?” Harry asked looking at Sirius.

Sirius waffled in his answer, finally saying, “Yeah I think he does. He never outright said anything, and he was trying to trap me in couple of questions, but he asked me to join the Order and I declined. He could certainly tell I wasn’t the same Sirius he remembered.”

Tonks smiled at Harry. “So we’re keeping quiet about you, but back to the discussion. With you here now, I’m a bit less likely to believe Neville’s alive, but before you, the answer was definitely yes, I believed Neville was the mysterious black wizard.”

“I’ve seen weirder things than an eight year old powerful wizard,” Harry figured.

“You know we’re going to come up in the next Order meeting,” Sirius said gesturing at Harry.

“You are?” Remus asked curiously. “I thought Harry managed to arrive without raising any red flags?”

“That was before this afternoon though,” Sirius added. “When Harry managed to thwart a Death Eater attack, requiring the Assistant Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to come to the scene and take our statements.”

"You met James?" Remus asked. "How was he? And, also, umm... Death Eater attack?"

"He was a prat."

"He was fine," Harry said giving his godfather a scolding look. "He was professional, though I'm not sure if he was staring because he was suspicious of me, or because he thought I looked familiar."

"Are you the stuffy Head of Family that tossed off the *Imperius Curse*?"

"Stuffy?" Harry repeated indignantly.

Tonks grinned. "I didn't connect that 'til just now. Yeah, Potter called you stuffy. You put him in a pretty grumpy mood all day."

"Go Harry," Sirius cheered quietly while letting his eyes drift towards the brunette seated at the bar.

"I'm not stuffy," Harry grumbled. "He's a judgmental pillock."

"Hey, that reminds me," Sirius suddenly asked, doing his best to act innocent. "The day after tomorrow's the second Friday of the month?"

"Yes," Remus slowly agreed.

"And don't the midget Potters go to the Order meetings too?"

"Why do you ask?" Remus warningly replied.

"No reason," Sirius grinned and winked at Harry.

"Hmm," Remus scoffed.

"Those meetings always last a good hour and a half, right?"

"Sirius," Remus warned.

"It's not what you think, so relax," Sirius argued.

"Well then what is it?"

Sirius failed to come up with a quick response and faltered at the sight of the attractive brunette looking right at him. She was whispering something to her friend. "Who is that Tonks? She's talking to your friend."

Tonks turned towards the bar and spotted. "Melissa?"

"Melissa's the one you introduced me to, right?" Sirius clarified. "Who's her friend?"

Tonks furrowed her brow. "Don't know." Tonks caught Melissa's eye and waved her over.

"Hey Tonks," Melissa greeted calmly approaching the group of wizards. "Sirius, wasn't it?"

Sirius just nodded.

"Okay, Sirius, listen up," Melissa began. "Don't be obvious about looking, but you know the brunette I was sitting next to that you were eyeing like a piece of meat?"

"34C, yup," Sirius answered.

"Lovely," Melissa grimaced. "That's wonderful. Because she got out of a long term relationship a little over a month ago and is now desperate for some unconditional sex. So I just need you to pretend that I've been subtly trying to figure out if you have any—Sirius, what are you doing? Don't get up. Don't go over... oh god."

Sirius had jumped to his feet and was determined to be a good Samaritan, not even waiting for Melissa to explain the situation. There was an attractive woman desperate for sex, and that was all Sirius needed to know.

"Liz is going to kill me," Melissa mumbled.

Harry shrugged. "It sounds like locating sex was her first priority and *ding-ding-ding*, she struck gold."

"Gold?" Remus repeated doubtfully.

“Well, asbestos, anyway,” Harry corrected.

Melissa shook her head, not particularly wanting to know. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Sorry about that,” Tonks said in sudden realization. “Melissa, you may remember my dad, Remus, and this sweet young hunk of man is named Harry.”

“I think you’ve made my godfather’s night,” Harry grinned in greeting. “Or Liz will soon.”

Melissa smiled weakly, before turning straight towards the ghostly form of Ginny. “And you are?”

Ginny let out an eep of surprise. “You can see me?”

“Crikey, Melissa,” Tonks said smacking her forehead. “I forgot that you’re a squib.”

Recalling Melissa’s question, Ginny answered, “I’m Gin-”

“Ginny!” Harry interrupted before he could stop himself. “That’s Ginny.”

Melissa glanced between Harry and Ginny. “Is Ginny short for anything?”

“Vaginnny!” Harry answered immediately hoping his voice wouldn’t crack. “It’s short for Vaginnny.”

Melissa looked at Harry oddly. “Not Virginia?”

Ginny huffed.

“Or Genevieve? Ginnifer?”

Ginny harrumphed.

“Nope, she’s our...” Harry paused and furrowed his brow. “Vaginnny.”

Sirius came running up to their table. "Melissa, it's been smashing seeing you again. Harry, you may want to stay on the other side of the manor tonight. Good evening ladies." Sirius finished without wasting a single breath and hurried towards the door of the bar where Liz was waiting.

Melissa tried not to think about what that meant. "So Harry, is that *short*... for anything?"

Ginny scoffed at how unsubtle the squib was acting.

"No, not short," Harry grinned proudly. "Personally, I think Harry's plenty long."

Ginny turned and scoffed at Harry.

"You're as shameless as your godfather," Melissa playfully mocked.

"You never know," Harry countered. "I could be *far* more shameless."

Melissa's eyes widened and she glanced at Tonks and Remus. She saw they were as amused as she was. "You're a wizard, right?"

Harry just grinned and winked at her, as a pair of his magical arms began to massage her shoulders.

"Oh goodness," Melissa stumbled for a moment at how quickly she relaxed. She had to turn her head both ways to verify there wasn't anyone there. "Tonks, Remus, it was a pleasure seeing you again. Harry? I must admit, I'm a little worried about Liz. I think the best thing will be for you to take me back to your place." She closed her eyes and groaned softly at Harry's impromptu ministrations.

"I think we'll catch up with you Lupins later," Harry stated as he got up and walked out with Melissa.

"I couldn't even tell when he cast magic," Remus finally admitted, trying not to think about how quickly they'd been ditched. "What was Harry doing to her?"

“No idea,” Tonks shook her head and bit her bottom lip. “But I think I’d like to find out.”

“The words of a disturbed and fanatical portrait come to mind,” Remus groaned not wanting details of his adopted daughter’s sex life.

“You’re one to talk, filthy half-breed,” Tonks retorted and stuck her tongue out playfully. “What do you think they’re gonna do at the Order meeting? Do they even know where we meet?”

“I don’t know,” Remus answered. “But I think for the sake of plausible deniability we’re better off not knowing.”

Tonks sighed. “Maybe, but I bet that’s not as fun.”

Harry slowly made his way down the stairs, still a little groggy getting up this early.

“Good morning, Harry,” Sirius boisterously greeted as he was inventorying the kitchen.

“You’re not a morning person, are you?” Harry asked fearfully.

“It all depends on the night before, now doesn’t it?” Sirius cheerfully retorted. “I hope you weren’t too upset that I ditched you?”

“Certainly didn’t seem it,” Melissa smugly answered as she walked into the kitchen.

Sirius saw the look on Melissa’s face, and glanced over at Harry, exorbitantly pleased with his godson. “Good morning, Melissa. I certainly didn’t expect to see you so soon.”

“Ugh,” Melissa grimaced and looked to Harry helpfully. “He’s a morning person.”

“Actually, I think he may still be drunk.” Harry corrected looking around the kitchen. “I see Kreacher cleaned this place up. We got anything for breakfast around here?”

"If you mean food," Sirius said looking in the last pair of cabinets in the row, "then no."

Melissa looked at Harry curiously. "What else would you-"

"Don't ask," Harry shook his head.

"I'd offer to run out and get something," Sirius shrugged. "But I don't really know my way around the neighborhood."

"Just apparate somewhere in the alley," Harry suggested. "Wizarding restaurants can get your carry-out meals ready a lot faster than most muggle places."

Sirius' eyes bulged. "Umm... Harry?"

Harry saw the worry on Sirius' face and glanced over at Melissa. He suddenly remembered with a wry smile. "That's right. You left too quickly last night before Melissa here spotted Ginny, and Tonks was kind enough to remind us that Melissa's a squib."

Sirius nodding in understanding before asking, "Where is Ginny?"

"She went away," Harry succinctly answered.

Melissa shrugged. "I don't think she likes me much."

"If I were to take a guess I'd bet it was probably more of a matter she didn't like what you were doing to Harry more than it was you personally," Sirius offhandedly remarked.

Harry sighed having halfway expected something like that.

Melissa clarified. "If you want to get technical, I think Harry was doing more things to me than I was doing-"

"Breakfast anyone?" Harry interrupted.

"Diego's okay?" Sirius asked looking at Harry and Melissa.

Harry nodded and saw Melissa looked indifferent. "Make sure to get muggle food and we've gotta watch what we say around Liz."

“Who?” Sirius asked in confusion.

“Oh Merlin,” Harry groaned while Melissa just goggled at Sirius. “That’s her name, Sirius. Liz. 34C? Up in your room still?”

“Huh,” Sirius said with a smile. “You learn something new every day. Alright, I’ll be back with four breakfast platters. You might need to wake... umm, what was her-”

“Liz,” Melissa angrily supplied.

“Liz,” Sirius repeated with a lecherous grin leaving them to wonder if he was pretending to have forgotten her name just to irritate them. “You might want to wake her up. She went back to bed, after calling in to take the morning off.”

“We got a phone?” Harry asked.

Sirius shook his head. “She’s got a mobile. Speaking of, we should probably get one of those. I mean we just moved in, so not having a phone hooked up works for now. But it won’t make much sense for too long.”

“I’m going to wake Liz,” Melissa stated as she left them alone in the kitchen. “She may be able to take the morning off, but I can’t.”

Harry watched Melissa glance over her shoulder back at him and grinned to himself.

Sirius saw the extra sway Melissa was putting into her hips and the look she flashed at Harry. When she’d disappeared out of view, Sirius punched Harry playfully on the arm. “You dirty man-whore, you!”

“Like you’re one to talk,” Harry chided. “Liz who?”

Sirius sighed happily feeling like a part of his life was back in order. “Merlin, I missed you James.” The moment the name tumbled from his mouth Sirius knew it was wrong.

Harry could only arch an eyebrow at the obvious slip of the tongue. He was highly amused and planned to poke fun at Sirius for this later.

Sirius shook his head. "Don't read too much into that. Okay, breakfast."

Just before Sirius could apparate away, Harry added. "And get some good juice. I don't want pumpkin."

"What's wrong with pumpkin juice?"

"It tastes like pumpkins."

"Fine," Sirius grumbled. "I'll get some muggle juice, *Harry*."

Remus and Tonks were sitting next to the four known members of the Potter family, James, Lily, James Jr., and Sarah. Tonks was having a whispered conversation with Sarah when the Headmaster stood up and addressed the Order.

"Welcome friends and allies," Albus began looking towards all those assembled. "It pleases me when we get together because it is convenient and not out of necessity."

"Sturgis?" Albus inquired. "Would you like to start us off with some good news?"

Sturgis Podmore stood up and nodded at everyone. "Hagrid and I just got back from our annual visits with the giants. All four leaders of the biggest clans all said the same thing: they would have said no, if there even had been an inquiry from the Dark Lord. But there weren't any."

"That is good news," Albus agreed. "And of the lesser clans?"

Sturgis shrugged. "Vondal doubted any of them would support the Dark Lord. To do so may incur the wrath of the other giants who wish to stay neutral. He said it with a lot more grunts and perhaps a few shorter words, but that was the gist of it."

"Excellent," Albus said. "And Grawp?"

“Doin’ great,” Hagrid answered enthusiastically. “He’s, eh, still datin’ that strange Chang woman.”

“Love comes in many forms,” Albus wisely added. “Emmeline? Have we heard back from the vampires?”

“Yes,” Emmeline Vance answered. “I had the misfortune of a surprise visit last week. Nothing has changed in their neutrality and they still can’t stop flirting like they’re in the theatre. And I have one personal message I’m supposed to deliver.”

Emmeline turned to the side to address the man standing in the corner. “Julius said, ‘Severus, stop writing. We’re not going to turn you.’” She turned back towards the rest of the Order and finished. “That was it.”

Albus could sense the anger and humiliation in the Potions Master and quickly continued. “Thank you, Emmeline. Remus, have you heard anything?”

Remus was holding in his laughter at the face Severus Snape was making and shook his head. “The only organized packs are all in Eastern Europe and they’d contact me before dealing with the Dark Lord.”

“Tonks?” Albus turned to the metamorphmagus. “I don’t know what details of your new assignment are classified, but is there anything you would like to share?”

Tonks’ eyes widened and she glanced over at James, who only shrugged in response. Tonks began, “Alright. Thing is, a few days ago some blonde bird showed up in the Department of Mysteries. The Unspeakables weren’t even sure where she came from, but she was asking a lot of curious questions about Lucius Malfoy.”

Everyone there was familiar with that name as the man had bought his freedom too many times to count.

James saw Tonks didn’t want to give out too many details, and continued for her. “What’s notable is that she stunned and obliterated three Unspeakables before escaping. And all we have to go on is a

description of a young to middle-aged blonde woman, who bears a passing similarity to Narcissa Malfoy but more... veela-like."

Tonks snorted at how large breasts consistently translated into veela-like. "So far she's not really committed any crimes that we know of other than assault on Ministry representatives when she escaped, but they got a lot of questions for her."

"The Department of Mysteries specifically requested Tonks for this job," James continued. "Indicating she was uniquely qualified for it, and instructing us not to ask why that is. Any interest in voluntarily offering answers to questions I'm not going to ask?"

Tonks smiled and shook her head knowing the real reason was because she knew Sirius, a recent confirmed dimension traveler. "Sorry. It's a pretty cushy assignment and I don't want to mess it up."

"If there were any danger or relevant threat," Albus jumped in. "I have no doubt Miss Lupin would inform us."

Tonks nodded heartily.

"I know James has a Death Eater attack to report on," Albus announced surprising many who hadn't even heard about one. "But was there anyone else with something they wished to discuss?"

Mundungus Fletcher grunted and said, "I heard some talk about worries on the other side, rumors that the Black family didn't just have a new Head, but an actual Lord."

"They are not just rumors," Albus answered, "But that ties into what James has to say. James?"

James patted his confused son on the arm as he stood up. "A couple days ago, three Death Eaters were going to put civilians under the *Imperius Curse* and attempt to burn down the Post Office in Diagon Alley. The reason this is the first most of you have heard of this is because it was thwarted before it ever got going."

"Was it Neville?" A hopeful voice in the back called out.

James Potter resisted the urge to groan at people jumping to conclusions. "No, it was not Neville. Gordon Smith, a cousin from Austria of *that* Smith family, is a marked Death Eater now in custody. He put a young man under the *Imperius Curse* in preparation for the attack only for the wizard to break the curse and subdue Mr. Smith rather severely. The other two Death Eaters immediately apparated away."

Amos Diggory let out a low whistle. "Breaking an *Imperius* is no simple task. Sounds like he pissed off the wrong guy."

"Considering how things worked out, I'd say he pissed off the right one," James countered. He continued a little pompously, "I was called in because the young man was Lord Black. Now there were a few curious things about this, first being that with him was the..." He paused just before saying the name, "Sirius Black that a few of us have met."

Remus and Tonks were nodding, making no effort to hide that they knew all of this.

"What I still don't understand, but have managed to ascertain from the goblins, is that they are both in fact, Lord Black. Sirius only received the title that morning."

"As fascinating as this is," Severus butted in, making no effort to hide his disdain. "Do you have a point?"

James frowned at the immature man's antics and proceed to ignore the interruption. "The other Lord Black, who I believe is named Harry-

Tonks and Remus were both nodding affirmatively, surprising James as he continued. "He spoke of the *Imperius* with familiarity. Not necessarily implying he was proficient at casting it, but at the very least the effects of being subjected to it. And after snapping the Curse on him, rather than simply disarming Smith, he broke both of the man's wrists instantaneously."

James saw he had their attention and added, "Without drawing his wand, saying a spell aloud, or even turning to face the Death Eater."

“Sweet,” James Jr. said quietly earning a chuckle from Remus.

“When I interviewed him afterwards, he was as calm and arrogant as you’d expect an ancient Lord to be,” James explained. “And after interrogating Smith, I got the feeling this Harry had some power to back-up his arrogance.”

“Is he a threat?” Arthur Weasley inquired.

“To Death Eaters it sounds like,” Dung answered earning himself some chuckles.

“What do we know about this Lord Black? Or the other one for that matter?”

Albus lifted a hand and answered, “I myself met with Sirius Black a few weeks ago as he bore such an uncanny resemblance to the one many of us remember.”

Albus was unconsciously stroking his beard. “But the man I met with had eyes far more haunted than should be. They still sparkled with mirth but he has clearly lived through horrors.

“The Unspeakables are notoriously tightlipped, but I managed to gather that they understood why his eyes seemed so... weathered. Given their attitude towards him, I surmised that they have no worries of him joining the Dark Lord. I perceived his attitude to be far more in line with the Sirius Black we remember than with some of the *other* members of the Black family. I believe Remus can tell us more. Remus?”

Remus was expecting this and explained. “I’d consider both Sirius and Harry friends. I can assure you all there’s no chance they’d ever join the Dark Lord.”

“Would they be interested in joining the Order?” Lily spoke up to ask.

“That was why I had approached Sirius to meet with him,” Albus answered.

“You approached him?” Moody snapped wondering what Albus was doing with so few precautions.

Albus nodded. “There’s undoubtedly a reason the Unspeakables are involved with him at all.”

“What’d he say?” Lily asked.

Albus smiled sadly. “I got the feeling he was sick of fighting and seeing friends die. He was not particularly receptive despite lacking direction in his life. But I do not know about the other one, Harry.”

Tonks leaned back and grinned. “Something tells me whichever way one of those Lord Blacks goes, so goes the other.”

“It’s this way.”

“No, it’s this way!”

“What are you talking about? You’ve never even been here.”

“I can see the wards from here.”

“Oh,” Sirius said looking in the direction Harry was pointing. “Maybe it is that way.”

Harry closed his eyes and sighed. “How did you talk me into this?”

“The Order meeting just started and we know this place is going to be empty for at least an hour. You’ve got Potter blood and should be able to open up the safe. Cheer up, Harry,” Sirius grinned as he began the trek towards Number Three Godric’s Hollow. “This will be fun.”

“And how much ward-breaking experience do you have?”

Sirius paused for a moment before continuing. “Let’s not quibble over the details.”

Harry stopped right in front of the first layer of wards next to Sirius. “This isn’t asking for trouble at all, now is it?”

“Aww come on,” Sirius grinned. “It’s not like Voldemort is going to show up and bounce a Killing Curse off your forehead, right?”

Harry sighed once more and was looking at all the layers of wards in front of them. “I’m going get you back for that, you know.”

“I know.”

“Alright. Let’s do this.”

CHAPTER SIX

"Now's your last chance to do the smart thing," Harry said taking a closer look at the wards in front of them.

"I'm insulted you even have to ask."

"Sorry Padfoot," Harry said patting the man on the back. "I should know better than to accuse you of being smart."

"Your mum and Moony used to try the same stuff, but I never gave in to their peer pressure."

Harry grinned at his godfather. "I see three different sets of wards. Any ideas on how you want to get around them?"

"Killing Curse?"

Harry turned towards Sirius scratching his head. "Let's try this again. Any ideas on how we can get past the wards *without setting them off*?"

"Alright fine," Sirius grumbled and cast a spell over his eyes. "The first ward is line-based and it appears to be... muggle-repelling and a wizard detection, right?"

Harry was impressed and it showed on his face.

"I know a thing or two," Sirius said pretending to be offended. "I wouldn't have suggested this if I didn't think we might pull it off."

"I'm just surprised you even know the difference between a line-based ward and an area ward."

"I've cast a few different area wards over the Slytherin table and hallway in my day," Sirius explained while experimenting on the ward. "I'm stronger than Moony, and Prongs has always been a bit... accident prone. That's why back in the day, the bigger wards were almost all my work."

"And Wormtail?"

“Wormtail,” Sirius bit the inside of his cheek. “He used to be a good lookout. Ah-ha! That’s it. You took your potion?”

Harry nodded.

Sirius focused on a simple fuzzy tennis ball and transfigured Harry, and all the things on his person, into the singular small inanimate object. With a pop he transformed into a large black dog. He picked up the tennis ball in his mouth and calmly walked across the first ward set protecting the Potters’ home.

He set the tennis ball down and with a pop transformed back into the healthy adult wizard. He sent the transfiguration reversal at the tennis ball, revealing a surprised Harry.

“I was conscious through that,” Harry exclaimed in surprise.

“Yeah,” Sirius nodded. “Have you never used a Norton’s Brew?”

Harry shook his head.

“Oh they’re great,” Sirius explained. “I’m sure you know most of the common effects, but essentially it just makes your body far more receptive to magic. Spells cast on you are far more effective, especially if you’re helping them along.”

“All spells?”

Sirius shrugged. “Just about. So be careful, pain spells are all magnified. With the boosted effect on you from the Norton’s, as long as I’m casting it and I want you to keep your mind, if you’re fully accepting the spell, then it leaves you conscious. We’ve used that for spying before, but you can’t stay that way for too long.”

“So to get past the barrier ward, you turned me into an inanimate object and you into a dog. Neither effected by muggle repelling, nor detected as a wizard,” Harry said, looking at the ward they had passed through. “You’re not too bad at this.”

“Why don’t you start pulling your weight and get us through the second one?”

“Fair enough,” Harry grinned, stepping up to inspect the ward. It was much thicker than the first and Harry could see it was a compound ward. “Here goes nothing.”

Harry located the anchor stone and sent a feedback loop into two different parts of the ward. The visible domes of magic expanded and brightened.

Sirius took a step back as everything brightened. “Did you just strengthen those?”

“Yeah, I suppose I did, but this set is a compound ward. I was trying to separate the parts so we could identify them all and deal with them in smaller groups.”

“Go Harry,” Sirius grinned. “I think you know more about wards than I do.”

“Area wards for apparition and portkey,” Harry announced. “It’s possible we’re keyed considering our counterparts but for now we’re just going to ignore those. It’s this barrier ward for dark magic that may be a problem.” Harry dropped to a knee and took a deep breath. “In case, I get dizzy.”

Harry sent a spell down a magical arm and into the anchor stone. A large dark purple box flared brightly revealing the walls went dozens of feet up capped by a ceiling at the top, but only a couple feet into the ground.

Harry stood up and let out his breath. “Lovely. I bet it’s for keeping out Death Eaters, but a lot of times my scar will set these types off.”

“Considering our intentions any sort of emotional detection could pick up on that too,” Sirius mused. “Think we can overpower it enough to jump through?”

“Yeah, but let’s not,” Harry said. “You see those dark wards in the inner set?”

Sirius nodded.

“Those are goblin wards,” Harry explained. “All these others are just defensive and alert-oriented. Goblin wards are completely different, and most of the time very nasty. We’re going to need our strength for overpowering those.”

“You can’t get past them?”

“I don’t know, that’s the thing,” Harry said with a shrug. “We could be able to safely walk past them without ever triggering, or we could walk through them and they choose to kill us in a very messy manner.”

“Overpowering that one sounds good to me,” Sirius said. “So how do we get past this purple one?”

“It’d definitely detect magic so transfiguring ourselves won’t work nor would the doggy side of you,” Harry explained. “It’s only a little bit into the ground, so how about a ward push?”

Sirius shook his head. “Never heard of it. Sounds good though.”

“I’m basically just trying to lift the edge and we’ll sneak in under it,” Harry said summoning a couple of twigs. He cast a basic barrier ward tying its ends to the sticks. Using a pair of his magical arms, he was pushing his makeshift barrier ward up against the large purple walls.

Sirius watched as it slowly rose out of the ground until the two sticks finally got directly underneath the wall.

Harry was sweating and pulling up the edge of the thick ward set. It was arching around the edges of his barrier, straining against the invading ward. “There,” Harry whispered in between breaths. “That’s as high as I’m going to push it. You’ve got to stay low.”

Sirius dropped to his knees and saw he’d still need to crouch to get under it. He turned back at Harry before crawling, “Are you gonna be okay?”

Harry nodded. “It’s not magically tiring, just physically. Go.”

Sirius hurried and crawled through. He stood up on the other side, looking through the translucent purple wall. He watched as Harry dropped to his knees and proceeded to crawl underneath while the ward set appeared to be getting heavier. Sirius grabbed a hold of his godson's arm and pulled him through and to his feet.

Harry accepted the help and let his simple barrier ward collapse, the two twigs falling to the ground lifelessly as the purple box flared angrily snapping back into position. "Thanks."

"When did you get so good at wards?"

"Horcrux hunting," Harry explained as they walked towards the final inner set of wards bearing all the brown murky signs of goblin magic. "Voldemort put a fair amount of effort into protecting his little toys with lots of devious and dangerous traps. Hermione and I both were quick learners out of necessity."

"You hunted for his toys?"

"By toys, I was referring to the pieces of his soul that he'd split off, and whose continued existence meant for all intents and purposes he was immortal."

"Oh... *those* toys."

"Yup," Harry said. "Have you ever tried to flood a goblin ward?"

Sirius shook his head.

"Me neither," Harry admitted. "And something tells me, it's going to be pretty tiring. Did you pack some pepper-up?"

"I got one," Sirius said. "You going to need it?"

Harry shook his head. "I brought four of them."

"Four! That'd kill you."

"Probably, yeah. I took three doses once over the course of about an hour and a half. Woke up eight days later with a muggle catheter in

me. Madame Pomfrey was trying to discourage me from getting hurt so frequently. Needless to say, I'll never do that again. I brought two doses for each of us, in case you forgot."

Sirius checked his watch. "Twenty minutes. Forty left. How are we going to overpower this one?"

"You know how to share your power with me?"

Sirius nodded. "You've got the Norton's Brew in you though, so you gotta be careful you don't drain me completely dry. With the Norton's, you'll be able to sap unconsciously."

Harry nodded and connected with the nearest goblin keystone. "Anytime."

Sirius cast a pooling spell and felt Harry start to drain magic from him.

Harry was feeding as much as he could smoothly straight into the keystone. The wards were sharpening in focus and flashing white. "Alright, it's starting to flood it. We need to jump through during one of the white flashes. It may... feel funny."

Sirius nodded and saw the flashes were steadily increasing and lasting longer each time the white appeared. He glanced over at Harry and received a nod in return.

The very next flash, Sirius lunged forward and hopped through the visible white energy barrier. His senses all flared and it felt as if he were being electrocuted for a split second.

Harry jumped through on the very next flash.

Slowly Sirius felt his magic replenishing as Harry stopped drawing from him. He let the pooling spell dissipate and drank the pepper-up he'd brought with him.

Harry downed a vial after seeing Sirius drink his. "You alright?"

Sirius nodded. "That wasn't too bad."

Harry's attention was drawn to the left side of the modest-sized cottage. "What's that?"

Sirius shook his head. "No idea, but whatever's in there is warded pretty tightly."

Harry glanced back at the manor and then the glowing warded and obscured area. "Want to peek?"

Sirius nodded and began to hike towards the wards at the edge of the woods. As he got closer he saw brown intermixed with yellow wards. "Those look like goblin wards from here."

"Yup," Harry agreed. "Looks like it's got some newer strengthening charms that get regular maintenance."

"We going to overpower this one too?"

Harry shook his head. "We just need past the obscuring field so we can see what's in there. We don't have to actually cross the rest of the wards."

Harry located the anchor and felt his way around it, identifying the obscuring spell. He looped the connection back into itself and the obscured area darkened and shrunk slightly. "Whoops, wrong way."

Sirius just watched Harry staring down at the magical anchor stone. Harry flipped the two ends of the loop around and the obscuring ward lightened to a cool grey, expanding outward just a few inches more than the other wards anchored with it.

"Careful you don't cross the other wards, but we can stick our heads through the first ward safely," Harry said before thrusting forward through the grey barrier. "Whoa."

Sirius followed Harry's lead, and just leant his upper body through the ward. "Gulping gargoyles! What the hell happened here?"

Blackened scorched ground that was still steaming surrounded a tree so dead and hollow, it looked like a skeleton. Dry branches snaked upwards, swirling counter-clockwise from the bone white barbed trunk.

Harry was staring at the ground just in front of the tree from which all this death seemed to spread. The wound on the ground was practically screaming ancient magic. Harry turned towards Sirius. "I think I might know what this is."

Sirius shook his head, realizing he'd been entranced just looking at the decaying soil and tree. "What?"

"I think this may be where I died."

Sirius agreed only briefly before indignantly arguing, "Why's it gotta be where *you* died? Why couldn't it be like this because this is where I died?"

Harry leaned back away from the ward and patted Sirius on the top of the head. "I suppose anything's possible."

"You were a baby and apparently *not* the one in the prophecy," Sirius argued, sticking his head back in the ward to look at the small piece of desolation. "This is obviously the death of a far more promising and powerful young man, who fought back valiantly."

"Oh really? No ancient archways of death you could've tripped and fallen into around here?"

"You'd better hope not," Sirius joked back. "You've tripped and fallen into just as many."

"Seen enough?" Harry asked pointing towards the warded area.

Sirius nodded. "Yeah. Let's get my wand and out of here before they get back."

Harry removed the loop from the anchor stone and the obscuring ward darkened and shrunk down to its normal size. He grabbed a twig off the ground and hurried after Sirius.

Sirius figured the front door might be protected from an unlocking charm, but doubted they'd bothered to ward the window. A whispered *alohomora* and Sirius was hopping through the frame and into the darkened living room.

“Sirius!” Harry whispered forcefully. “At least disillusion yourself in case there are portraits.”

“Good point,” Sirius agreed and tapped the top of his head, casting the spell. “If things are like I remember, then the only wizarding portrait is an old Great Uncle in the dining room, who watches the floor and delivers messages.”

Harry had already disillusioned himself as he too climbed up into the living room. “Where are we going?”

“There’s a safe in the floor of James’ study,” Sirius said as he crept towards the stairs.

“Wut choo doin’ here, boy?” A frightened little female house elf squeaked loudly.

“Crap,” Sirius blurted out immediately.

“How’d choo get in here?” The elf demanded, shaking her little finger and holding herself with a bit more confidence.

Harry knew the elf could pop out of the way of any spell it saw coming. Knowing the easy solution, he snaked an invisible arm around behind the elf, stunning her before she even took notice of the magic in the air.

“Sirius? How many house elves do they have?”

“Just the one,” Sirius weakly answered. “Suppose I should have mentioned her earlier.”

“That would’ve required remembering her before, and that appears to be asking too much.”

“Nuts,” Sirius said looking at the elf. “I don’t suppose you know how to memory charm a house elf.”

Harry smirked at Sirius.

“You *do* know how to memory charm a house elf!”

Harry stunned the elf again for good measure. "It's not that different from memory charming anyone else, but we should keep her stunned for now and *obliviate* her before we leave. You sure there aren't any other surprises you've neglected to mention?"

"Moony said they bought the elf when Lily was pregnant with James Jr. and Sarah was still in diapers. Forgive me for not remembering an elf I'd never met."

Harry followed quickly behind the disillusioned form of his godfather. The magical sight spell made him easy to follow and they arrived in the study of James Potter. Harry laid the unconscious house elf onto the couch while Sirius unrolled the rug covering the floor. A large stone square lay flush with the hardwood floors. This was the magical safe.

There was no visible door, nor any handle, knob, or settings at all. Just the Potter Family crest was carved in relief onto the stone.

Harry look at the solid stone block. "You do know I've never seen this before and have no clue how to open it."

Sirius realized he'd been staring at Harry and waiting on him. "Sorry. You can try just sticking your hand on the crest, but you may need a drop of blood."

Harry placed his hand over the crest and pushed down. He knocked on it, and it felt like solid stone. He used his new ash wand with a unicorn hair and pricked his finger, letting a couple drops fall onto the shield in the Potter crest.

Harry saw nothing happening and looked up at Sirius. "Did I just cut myself for no reason?"

Sirius sighed. "Muggleborns." Sirius raised a hand before Harry could retort. "I know. You're not. But you might as well be. Try putting your hand on it now."

Harry placed his hand over the crest and looked back at his godfather. "Great. Now I'm getting blood all over my hand."

Sirius was looking at magical safe accusingly. "That should have opened it."

"Well it didn't."

"Have you even asked it to open?"

A soft rustle of air blew out as the stone surface dissolved revealing a compartment far larger than possible without magic.

"Oh," Harry said in lieu of an apology.

"Merlin there's a lot of crap in here," Sirius said peering into the safe.

"*Accio* wand," Harry incanted. A twelve inch driftwood wand came zooming out from the underneath a couple old tapestries.

Sirius lunged forward and grabbed the wand he'd missed so much. Just like the time he first purchased it at Ollivander's, silver sparks and a black mist slowly emitted out from the driftwood wand tip. "That's the stuff."

Harry was looking at Sirius' wand closely and began to transfigure the stick he'd brought with him. He lightened the wood tone, shaped it to resemble the wand, and coated it with a thin layer of lacquer. "Think this'll pass for it?"

Sirius held his wand up next to it. "Nice work."

"We don't want to advertise the fact that anything is missing," Harry explained as he began to push the fake replacement wand further down into the safe. He repositioned the tapestries to cover up the duplicate. "Shall we go?"

Sirius nodded when he saw Harry frowning at him. "What?"

"How do we close the safe?"

"Same way you open it." Sirius answered without pause.

Harry scrunched his face in concentration. He exhaled tiredly. "I'm asking it to close. I'm ordering it to close. I'm willing it to close. It's not closing."

Sirius frowned. "Maybe you need to bleed on it again."

"Bleed on what exactly?"

"Oh," Sirius said looking into the lidless block turned magical safe.

Harry just stared at Sirius silently. After ten quiet seconds Harry suggested, "Maybe it's just a time delayed thing and it'll close on its own."

Sirius stood there silently for a moment waiting on a bright idea to strike or for the safe to miraculously close. When it seemed neither was going to happen, he said, "I'm sure that's it. Just needs time."

The pair of them stared at the safe for another minute in silence.

"You're sure you-"

"I'm still ordering it to close right now."

Sirius glanced at his watch. "We're already going to be pushing it time-wise." He swished around his new wand and directed it at the rolled up rug. The rug unfurled and covered up the still wide open magical safe. "Why don't you *obliviate* the elf. We've got to work our way back through the wards."

"I was thinking about that," Harry said moving over towards the unconscious house elf. "Most homes don't have any restrictions on the outgoing floo, only on the incoming. I say we sneak past the portrait and just floo somewhere public."

Sirius was getting a headache keeping this magical sight spell on. He just nodded, looking forward to canceling the disillusionment and oculamagi spell. "Works for me."

Harry left the elf with the memories it expected to have this evening. Only that it had done some work and that there were no visitors.

The two Lord Blacks, disillusioned and silenced, crept into the dining room and saw the portrait was audibly snoring. Harry cast a slight obscuration charm in front of the portrait to keep it from waking up and spotting any flashes from the fireplace.

Sirius went first and Harry sent a finishing spell at the obscuration charm, moments before the floo took him as well.

The pair landed disillusioned and covered in soot at the Leaky Cauldron. One pop right after the other and they both had apparated back to Grimmauld Place.

Sirius let out a tired breath and collapsed onto the couch after vanishing the dust from his robes. "That... was *fun*."

"If there is no other business to discuss," Albus said. "I think that shall conclude this evening's meeting. James, Remus, Tonks? Would you mind staying for a moment?"

All four Potters and both Lupins had not even got up when the other Order members began to trickle out of the meeting hall.

"I wondered if perhaps there was anything more you'd like to share about the Lords Black that you might not have wanted all the other ears to hear."

"Stuffy, arrogant purebloods. What's there to say?" James snidely remarked.

"Their politics could work to our advantage," Albus explained. "Since they carry the title of Lord they can reassign their representatives to themselves or others."

"Their politics?" Tonks asked slightly uncomfortable at the idea of political power in those particular hands.

"The Black family has a seat on the Wizengamot and the Hogwarts Board of Governors," Albus explained. "The other thing I didn't want to bother too many people with was a curious meeting with Mr. Ollivander."

James suddenly jumped to his feet in surprise. He turned towards Albus and frowned. "Excuse me, Albus. It appears someone just exited via the floo at our place. Lily, you stay here until I get back."

Albus looked thoughtful. "Would you like my assistance?"

James shook his head. "It's probably just someone got lost and left right away."

"We'll go with you," Remus said as Tonks stood next to him.

James nodded, mentally choosing to portkey to his bedroom rather than use the floo. "I'm sure it's nothing. Grab on."

Remus and Tonks shared a glance and put their hands on James as he activated his portkey.

"There was no one here when we left," James explained in whispers while immediately checking his bedroom for signs of intrusion. "And the wards never detected anyone breaking in, only that the floo was triggered outbound. Two times in a matter of seconds."

He led the way out of his bedroom creeping through the eerily quiet home. The three of them worked in formation with James in the lead. He was repeatedly casting diagnostic spells that would sense other people even by heat signatures, and was searching for any new magic.

They'd worked their way to the fireplace in the dining room without incident. James looked around and saw absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. He relaxed finally and loosened the grip on his wand. "Whoever it was didn't seem to do anything and are gone now. See if you guys can find anything. I'm going to check out the ward anchors."

Remus nodded solemnly at James and went to check on Peter Potter, the snoozing portrait there in the dining room. He heard James exit out the back door to check out the wards and turned to see his daughter fighting a chuckle.

"I can't believe those buggers would do this," Remus cursed. "And stop finding this funny."

“What do you think they did?” Tonks asked amusement clear in her expression.

“I’ve no idea. That couch leech is childish enough to go to a lot of effort for some elaborate prank, but even he should know better than break into the bloody Assistant Director’s home with a bloody Dark Lord on the loose,” Remus snapped. “James and Lily are going to be worried sick for no good reason.”

“Well let’s allay their worries then,” Tonks said, mocking her adoptive father. She knew she was keyed in and grabbed a handful of floo powder. She chucked it in, and said, “Lupin’s Loft.” As the floo began to activate she let herself get just barely sucked in and apparated right back to the Potters’ dining room.

A split second later, another pop sounded James’ sudden arrival.

“Did you just...?”

Tonks raised her hand. “That was me, playing with it. Considering nothing seems damaged, missing, or cursed I’m guessing you might have a loose connection or maybe a couple of the Mikes are doing some maintenance on the floo system close enough to trigger your sensors. If I were you, I’d think about changing your address in the off-chance it was bad guys testing your wards. Sounds like they held up though, right?”

“The wards are all up and functioning. They look to be as strong as they’ve ever been in decades.” James nodded in agreement. “Yeah, you’re probably right. I’ll go get Lily and the kids. Let them know it was a false alarm.”

James activated his portkey to the Order headquarters leaving the two Lupins alone again.

“That was well done,” Remus said smiling at his daughter.

“I was raised a Marauder,” Tonks said with her chin held high. “You always must be ready to lie and cover for your mates, even if it means pretending to have testicular cancer.”

Remus had not heard this one and raised a curious eyebrow.

“Some people will believe anything you tell them about a metamorphmagus.”

James Jr., followed by his mother and then father all came exiting out the floo.

“Hiya Uncle Moony,” James Jr. greeted just as the grandfather clock in the living room chimed the hour. “Oh crap. I gotta hurry.” He ran up the stairs towards his bedroom while both of his parents chuckled at his antics.

“Thanks guys,” Lily said squeezing Tonks’ hand. “Have you eaten? There should be a few slices of cobbler left.”

“Peach?” Tonks asked hopefully.

“Blackberry.”

“Ooh,” Tonks exhaled happily. “Even better.”

Remus grinned. “Well, if you’re twisting my arm.”

“Nappy!” Lily firmly called out.

With a pop, the Potter family house elf appeared. “Yes’m, Miss Lily?”

“Nappy!” James blurted out having forgotten about her.

“Massa?” Nappy said turning towards James.

“Did you see anyone tonight? Or hear them?” James inquired having completely overlooked the sentient being that had been at home.

“No sir,” Nappy said shaking her head. “Iza jus’ been doin’ my cleanin’, Massa. I din’t hear nuffin’.”

James felt a little more secure already. “No one in the dining room or using the floo?”

“No sir,” Nappy assured him with smile. She was rubbing her chin in thought. “But Iza been a singin’ and a hummin’ while Iza workin’. Miss Lily said I could do dat.”

“You have such a beautiful singing voice, Nappy,” Lily assured the diminutive creature. She recalled the reason she’d first summoned the elf. “I just wanted to make sure we had some cobbler left.”

“Blackberry, yes’m. Would choo like me to get choo fo’ slices?”

“No thank you, Nappy,” Lily said with a smile. “We’ll help ourselves.”

“Iza gonna clean out the fireplace now then,” Nappy said waddling her way over towards the hearth.

The group of four thanked the small elf and went to the kitchen for some dessert. Remus was at the rear of the group and saw Nappy had grabbed her little house-elf sized mop and was pushing it back and forth, singing quietly to herself.

“Day after day, workin’ fo’ Massa, Massa gonna sell me ‘less I start workin’ fassa, oh day after day, workin’ fo’ Massa...” her little voice trailed off as Remus entered the kitchen thinking Nappy was almost as odd as Kreacher.

They finished off the rest of the cobbler and chatted amiably for over half an hour. Remus and Tonks bid them good night and apparated away rather than to dirty the sparkling clean fireplace.

James was thinking about all the paperwork he still had to finish on the two new ancient Lords. He was brought out of his musings when he stepped into the middle of the rug in his study. He and the rug had slowly sunk all the way up to his waist into the Potter magical safe.

“What the hell?”

“The adrenaline, the excitement, the lightheaded feeling you get when you finally turn off your magical sight spell,” Sirius argued in between the last bites of his supper. “Admit it, Harry. *That* was fun.”

Harry couldn't have stopped the smile from splitting across his face. "Maybe a little."

"A little *schmittle*," Sirius waved off Harry's understatement. "You know more than me about that stuff, but we make a good team. What say we hit a wizarding bar and pick us up a couple of wenches?"

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Harry argued sitting back patting his full belly after their large meal.

"Unless someone already has their eye on something," Sirius said before turning to look around the various tables in Diego's. He turned back towards his godson.

Harry nodded over Sirius' left shoulder. "Dark hair over there I've caught staring this way twice already. Not sure about the ogre she's with."

Sirius glanced over his shoulder and had to stifle a snort. The ogre in question just caught the raven-haired woman smiling at Harry and grabbed her to get up and leave.

"Damn," Harry said softly as the attractive woman was side-along apparated away.

"Harry, do you really not know who that was?"

Harry shook his head.

"That ogre, as you call him, was Stephen Parkinson, or Baron Parkinson in most circles."

"That was Parkinson?" Harry asked having never met the man in his dimension, and only knew he had been friends with Malfoy. "Blimey. I didn't know Pansy had a hot older sister."

"She may not," Sirius chuckled. "That was Pansy's hot older Mum."

Harry's eyes widened. A devious glimmer appeared in his eyes. "Parkinson's a Death Eater, right?"

Sirius shrugged. "Don't know for sure, but he definitely associates with the type. Was he one in our old dimension?"

Harry noticed Sirius had readily accepted this as *their* new dimension, not a new dimension. "To be honest... I don't know. Never met him, but I'd always pretty much assumed." Harry was obviously deep in thought as his eyes kept twinkling despite the dangerous smile on his face.

"Alright, what's that look mean?"

Harry acted completely innocent. "What look?"

"That look," Sirius insisted pointing at Harry. "The one that says you're up to something."

Harry shrugged nonchalantly. "I was just thinking about how we've got to pay that 134 galleon overdue notice before they'll reconnect our floo. And then I was thinking about tonight. You're right. We do make a good team. And it was definitely fun."

Sirius narrowed his eyes. "What are you up to?"

Harry glanced around the restaurant ensuring no one was paying them either too much or too little attention. "What would you think about maybe doing something like tonight... again?"

Sirius furrowed his brow. "You want to steal from Prongs some more? I know a thing or two about tempting fate and that's just not a particularly bright idea."

Harry shook his head slowly, urging Sirius to catch his meaning. "Not from Prongs."

Sirius took a moment to process what Harry was implying when his eyes widened in hope. "Don't you tease me about this."

"We could use the money."

"Harry, you better not be playing with me."

"We've got a little leeway thanks to our ass-backwards *noble* status."

"I swear to Merlin, if you're suggesting what I think you are, the answer is yes, yes, a million times yes."

"Not just anyone," Harry insisted determinedly as he leaned forward. "*Death Eaters*."

Sirius glanced over his shoulder where Parkinson had formerly been. "I love you Harry, I really do."

"I mean once we've confirmed they are in fact Death Eaters," Harry rationalized aloud. "It's kinda like we'd be doing a public service, right?"

Sirius couldn't help it and sniffled as he turned away in joy. "Damn bug just flew in my eye."

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Master?”

Harry slowly opened his eyes trying to remember everything that happened last night. He felt Kreacher gently nudging him. “Bluh?”

“Master, the halfbreed is at the back door and he brought his mudblood with him.”

Harry sensed the naked woman lying next to him stiffen in fear. He placed a calming hand on her hip and rubbed gently trying to assure her.

“Let them in,” Harry instructed the elf. “They are always welcome here, even when we’re out.”

Kreacher was still confused but nodded in agreement. “Would you like some breakfast, Master?”

“That sounds wonderful Kreacher,” Harry said. “Check with our guests, but I believe there should be six of us eating.”

Kreacher popped away to do as ordered. He still hadn’t figured out what to make of his new Masters.

“Good morning, Katie.”

Katie Bell looked up at the Lord Black uncomfortably. Last night had been wonderful and she never even considered the idea that he might be a Death Eater or blood purist. “Good morning?”

Harry rolled over to face her and smiled crookedly. “Don’t mind our peculiar elf’s cute little nicknames. He was simply raised that way.”

Katie relaxed momentarily only to be startled by the magnified voice of a werewolf.

“WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU GUYS THINKING?”

Harry quickly cast a *Sonorus* charm around his throat and replied. "We have guests, Remus. A little decorum would be welcome, if you please."

A slightly quieter muffled voice called back. "Sorry."

Harry smiled at Katie warmly. "I suppose we should-"

A muffled crash interrupted him quickly followed by the voice of an auror. "Dammit!"

Harry snickered. "That would be Auror Tonks tripping over the umbrella stand. You can stay for breakfast, can't you?"

"Crap!" Katie blurted out sitting up quickly. "My sister's going to be worried sick. I told her I would floo her if I was staying out overnight."

Harry winced. "We haven't gotten ourselves hooked up to the floo yet. But if you want to borrow my owl, you're welcome to."

Katie leaned forward to snag a passionate morning kiss, curious how Harry's morning breath would taste. She found it to be surprisingly pleasant. "That'd be great."

The door to Harry's bedroom swung open and Kid Killer McGee flew right in to perch on the headboard.

"You're a pretty smart one, aren't you?" Harry said looking at his owl.

The owl just gave Harry a condescending look and stuck out his leg towards the nude young woman.

Katie was pleased to see a common muggle pen and some paper nearby and quickly scribbled a note assuring her sister that she was fine. She handed it to the owl that flew out the bedroom door and down the hallway.

"We're still here," Tonks' voice carried up towards the bedroom in a particularly unsubtle reminder.

Harry chuckled at Tonks' impatience as both he and Katie got dressed.

There was a persistent tapping while they put their scourgified clothes back on that caused Harry to notice his owl was just sitting on Sirius' doorknob, pecking the door every few seconds.

"Kid Killer?"

The owl turned towards Harry and then back at the door, banging its beak on the wooden door.

"Is something wrong with Sirius?"

The owl just pecked on the door again. As Harry approached it flew up and landed on his shoulder. Harry waved Katie back, drew his wand, and slowly stuck his head into the other Master bedroom of Grimmauld Place.

The owl was just about launch into the room when Harry pulled right back and slammed the door closed.

Harry tried to calm the agitated owl on his shoulder. He turned back to the bewildered young Bell woman and smiled. "Found your sister." Harry grabbed the letter from Kid Killer McGee and handed it back to Katie. "No need to mail her. How about that breakfast?"

"Oh," Katie said softly in confusion. She repeated louder in realization, "Oh. Are they...?"

"Yup."

"Right now?"

"Yup."

"Okay," Katie said turning to go down the stairs. "I don't think I want eggs anymore."

"Fair enough," Harry said knowing not to judge. "I'm guessing they just recast a silencing charm and never heard our earlier discussion with Remus and-"

"Still here," Tonks yelled loudly from downstairs again.

"Tonks," Harry finished unnecessarily.

"She sounds cheery," Katie added, walking with Harry down the stairs.

"Tonks, Remus," Harry greeted. "I'd like you to meet Katie Bell. We'll give the other two a little more time before sending Kreacher in after Sirius and..." Harry peeked at the note still in Katie's hand.

"Melody," Katie supplied before Harry could.

"Melody," Harry agreed. "That's a pretty name."

"You don't have to hit on everything," Tonks grumbled.

Harry grinned and added, "It's not nearly as pretty as your name, *Nymphadora*." Harry frowned in surprise when she failed to throw a hissy-fit.

Tonks smirked. "You really want to start the name game, little boy...who...something?"

"Hmm," Harry commented realizing Tonks hadn't even done any pig snouts or other goofy metamorph transformations aside from flirting. It appeared growing up with Remus taught her how to take a joke better. And more than likely how to get revenge better. "No, I think I'll pass on that game. Thank you though."

With only a pop, the dining table filled with breakfast foods.

"Kreacher," Harry called out waiting for the house elf to appear.

"Is everything alright, Master?"

Harry turned to the oddly well behaved elf. "This all looks great," Harry leaned down to talk quieter. "I just wanted to make sure none of this is the poisoned food."

Kreacher felt hope for the future blossom in his cold black heart. "Not this time, Master. But I can poison some desserts if you like."

"I'll keep that in mind, but not today."

Kreacher nodded with a smile and popped away.

"Eat up," Harry announced passing the eggs away from Katie.

"We're not going to wait for the others?" Remus asked.

Harry looked at Katie shrewdly. "That's a good question. How long do you think we should wait before sending Kreacher in after them?"

"I say send him now," Katie said with a shrug.

"Does Sirius or Melody need to sleep in?" Remus wondered.

"They're not sleeping now," Harry said with an indicative shake of his head.

Remus nodded in understanding. Tonks answered, "Yeah, I think now sounds good."

"Kreacher," Harry called out once more beckoning the elf. Harry turned towards the others, "How should we do this?"

Katie looked confused while Remus suggested, "Ice water?"

"Bullhorn?" Tonks offered.

Katie saw the others turn to her and shrugged, "Quietly and calmly?"

Harry shook his head in amazement at the sheer audacity of Katie's suggestion. He turned to the elf, "Tell Sirius and Melody we're having breakfast. If you have to slap Sirius with a fish a few times to get his attention, then please feel free. But no messing with Melody."

"Certainly, Master," Kreacher popped away.

"Slap him with a fish?" Tonks asked with a grin.

Harry shrugged. "Ice water and bullhorn felt a bit... uninspired."

With a pop a shirtless Sirius apparated right next to Harry. "What the hell?"

"Good morning, Lord Black," Harry greeted.

Sirius' anger disappeared automatically every time Harry addressed him with the honorific. "Dammit." Sirius couldn't help but grin. "Morning, Katie, Tonks, Remus. Did you tell that demented elf to do that?"

Harry shrugged. "I might have offered a suggestion on one way to grab your attention."

"Stab me in the ass with a swordfish?"

Harry looked at others and frowned. "Hmm. We may need to be exceedingly precise in our instructions to Kreacher."

"Yeah, I wouldn't trust him not to poison the food," Sirius agreed just before apparating back to his bedroom.

Sirius got dressed and came down to breakfast with Melody a notable ten minutes later. They ate a pleasant meal before the two Lord Blacks walked the Bell sisters out back where they could apparate out safely. Melody put forth an effort to kiss Sirius goodbye and leave him with a lasting memory. Katie took that as a challenge and decided to kiss Harry goodbye even harder with her legs wrapped around his waist.

As soon as the two women apparated away, Tonks and Remus were on the dimension travelers like hawks. "What the hell were you doing in the Potters' safe?"

"Aww crap," Sirius grumbled. "They know."

"Nice work on remembering to act innocent, Sirius," Harry muttered back at him.

"Mr. Stick-up-the-arse noticed?"

“He fell into his open safe,” Tonks chuckled. “That’s one of the poorest examples of covering your tracks I’ve ever heard of.”

Remus was looking at them suspiciously. “What were you doing in there? Why break in?”

Sirius pulled out his old wand and wiggled it between his fingers. “Wanted to get this.”

“You could’ve just asked him,” Remus pointed out with a frown.

“Well that wouldn’t have been any fun,” Sirius retorted. “He doesn’t suspect us, does he?”

Remus shook his head. “I don’t know how you guys got in without triggering their wards, but he felt two instances of outbound floo. We went to inspect and found nothing. A few hours later he walks into his study...”

Tonks was chuckling to herself. “It was the funniest bunch of conclusions those Potters kept drawing. Because an old family blood warded safe is practically impenetrable, James knew only Potter blood and a willing Potter could’ve opened it. Lily didn’t know how they could have gotten past the wards, because even the Potters register when they cross them. And they’re certain no one was home when they left. Something James Jr. said led Lily to believe he had been playing with a time turner—or time somehow—in his room when they got home. James grounded him for illegally going back in time in his room because according to James that’s the only way someone could have gotten through their wards without triggering them.”

“James Jr. protested his innocence,” Remus explained. “Claimed he didn’t do anything like that. Then Lily went off on the theories of Odenberg. All about how when people go back in time and cause catastrophic problems that would destroy the natural timeline, then magic fixes the problem and erases the memory of the culprit.”

“So James then is still grounding James Jr. for the rest of summer,” Tonks continued. “And James Jr. basically admits that that all must be true, but since he has no memory of it and they can’t prove he did it then he shouldn’t be punished for something that without

knowledge or memory of has any affect on his character. He argued it's the same as punishing him for contemplating a course of action, not taking one."

Remus rolled his eyes. "With the mystery solved and James Jr. guilty but obliterated by magic, I think it's safe to say that no, they do not suspect you guys."

Tonks snickered. "But they're going to check the next few days' worth of wizarding and muggle news to make sure James Jr. didn't do anything else untoward while he was at the Order meeting."

Harry and Sirius had just been giving each other goofy smiles throughout the two Lupins' explanations. Sirius snickered. "Merlin, wizards will believe anything."

"Yeah," Harry agreed nudging his godfather on the arm. "I even knew a couple best friends who'd both believed that the other was a Death Eater in the face of absolutely no evidence indicating so."

Sirius glanced at Remus and shrugged. "In fairness, he is a werewolf. Conventional wisdom says I'm allowed a little leeway."

Remus saw Harry and Sirius look at him and shook his head. "Oh hell no. I'm not taking any blame for the things that pedophile did. I'm the *good* Remus. I never wrongly assumed any of my best friends were traitors."

Sirius smirked at Tonks. "And do you know what else the so-called good Remus never did?"

Tonks and Remus both groaned while Sirius slapped the back of his neck. "Dammit Harry, stop pinching me. I didn't even say it."

A couple of days later Sirius and Harry began the real groundwork on their new jobs. They didn't have the money for an invisibility cloak nor any of the illegal ward breaking toys Harry wanted.

Sirius made first contact with an old friend based out of an ungoverned chain of tropical islands. He figured if Felix was willing to

harbor him as a fugitive in his original dimension, then he'd be willing to not demand answers in this one. Felix just smiled, never even questioning the fact that Sirius Black had died twenty-five years ago and now was looking to fence a lot of stuff quietly.

Doing a little reconnaissance was the next order of business, as neither Harry nor Sirius knew where the Parkinsons lived, what their schedules were like, or what sort of underwear they each favored. The Lord Blacks knew they'd have to split up. Since Harry was going to confirm that at least one was a Death Eater, and apparently he had already ensnared Melinda Parkinson with his boyish charm, his target was Baron Stephen Parkinson.

Sirius on the other hand was charged with trailing and identifying the habits of Melinda Parkinson. If that meant Sirius had to spend all the remaining galleons he had taken from Gringotts on a jinxed pair of Omnioculars that could see through walls, and purely coincidentally clothes too, then so be it.

They'd agreed to cast new glamour charms over their faces and clothes every hour in order to not arouse suspicion in either Parkinson.

Harry had trailed Stephen Parkinson to a hidden wizarding Alley in Manchester. He knew the permanently frowning stern man was going to exit the building he'd just entered. Harry simply had to wait for him to leave and he'd be waiting close enough to get confirmation.

There had always been an easy way to identify whether a person carried the Dark Mark of Lord Voldemort or not. There just weren't very many people who could take advantage of this particular method.

Harry discovered it many years ago. The trio had been out following leads on the horcruxes and studying in their free time. Hermione wanted to unravel the magic of the Dark Mark. Her research and Harry's input led them to determine the spell that Voldemort designed to mark his followers was a modified bastardization of a serpent tattooing spell.

One of the major weaknesses of the spell was that the Dark Lord was unable to cast it on himself. That was why he needed someone

carrying the mark in order to connect to other marked followers, or to issue a summons to all of the Marks.

Hermione was unable to discover a way to magically sense the Dark Mark and no oculamagi spells could definitively identify it. But the particulars of the original tattoo spell meant that serpents would recognize it immediately. So if there happened to be a parselmouth around, they need only ask a snake if someone carried the Mark.

The first thing Harry did after spotting Baron Parkinson this morning was to quietly cast *Serpentsortia* and whisper instructions to the tiny conjured snake. It settled peacefully into Harry's pocket and was content to rest there.

Harry quietly hissed to the snake to let him know if any of the men walking past carried the Dark Mark.

The next two men to exit the building paid no attention to the middle-aged man unobtrusively leaning against the wall. The snake informed Harry they were not marked but that they smelt of snagdies and wasted youth. It was another five minutes before Baron Parkinson left the building. The moment he neared the snake in Harry's pocket had perked right up and was sticking his little head out.

"Oh yes," the snake hissed lingering on the S. "This one's got it. And he smells like ointment and jealousy."

Harry felt the mirror in his other pocket heat up and did his best not to react to the snake's excessive commentary.

"He frowns too much."

Harry quietly tried to shush the creature.

"But if he needs an ointment he may have a very good reason to frown."

As soon as Baron Parkinson apparated away Harry let out the breath he'd been holding in and vanished the loquacious conjured snake. He walked around a corner, making sure no one was watching him and activated the two-way mirror.

Harry blinked as he realized he didn't recognize the face on the other side. But then remembering the glamours he'd gone through he doubted he was recognizable either.

"Who the hell are you?" the old man in the mirror asked suspiciously.

Harry sighed. "We're supposed to be under glamours, remember?"

"Yeah, but still. How do I know you really are... who... you... don't look anything like?"

Harry made sure no one was looking and tried, "How about this? The fact that I'm carrying a damn mirror around makes me feel like a bloody Malfoy. And now that I've said it out loud, and can no longer pretend to ignore that fact, I think I'll be getting a rash."

The old man chuckled. "Okay I guess you are you."

"Actually," Harry said narrowing his eyes. "Verifying my identity is a pretty smart idea and *completely* out of character for you."

"Oi!"

"So how do I know you are... who you... want me to think... you are?"

"Okay, now you just sound silly," Sirius retorted with a familiar grin answering any questions about his identity. "Target two, the MILF, is in remarkably good shape. She purchased some new dress robes for a dinner party next Saturday."

"Dinner party?"

Sirius nodded. "The Baron and Baroness will both be in attendance and out of the house. Got any good news?"

Harry nodded. "Target one, not-the-MILF, has been confirmed as viable. So far he's not even noticed any of the tracers."

"Yes well, not-the-MILF is a confirmed tool as well."

Harry wasn't going to disagree with that description. "If you think the MILF won't notice, cover her with a tracer or two. We'll try and hone in on the signals tonight and assess the location."

"'Case the joint,' Harry, just say 'case the joint.'"

"Oi, what happened to no names?"

"Oops?"

"Tracers, then? Can you at least remember that much?"

Sirius let out a tired sigh. "Since I have to, I guess I'll accidentally bump into the MILF when she's bending over."

"You poor suffering soul," Harry grumbled about to close off the two-way mirror connection when an important thought occurred to him. "You saved some recordings with your Omnioculars, right?"

"I think that's the place," Harry said softly.

Sirius whistled at the sight of it. "That's one big ass manor."

Harry was glancing at their surroundings. "Sensors only go about halfway up that hill. Follow me." With a soft pop Harry disappeared and reappeared just below the ridgeline of a small wooded area behind the impressive Parkinson home. Sirius apparated right next to him.

Harry reached into his bag and floated out four anchor stones. "Normally I can do this under fifteen seconds, but if I flub it, they'd notice the magical discharge. So," Harry explained as he continued to carve rudimentary symbols onto the stones. "I'm taking my time and doing it right."

The four stones zipped away from their bodies, held in place by invisible magical arms. Harry was mumbling under his breath and sounded slightly like an old man wheezing before swirling his arm in a large circle and pointing his wand straight into the ground.

"Fidelio!" Harry cast in a firm confident voice. Magic flowed from his wand into the ground and seeped outwards until it hit the four stones arranged in a square around them. As soon as the magic reached the stones it began to flow perpendicular to the ground towards the sky. Harry snapped his wrist and twisted his wand to point straight up sending more magic flowing upward. It flattened against an invisible ceiling and began to spread outwards, meeting the magic flowing from the stones at sharp crisp corners.

The roughly 3 meter by 3 meter cube flashed once in a white light and was done.

Sirius looked around and saw nothing seemed to have changed or happened. "That's it?"

Harry double-checked no one had noticed the magic and quickly shoved Sirius outside of the invisible cube walls.

"Whoa," Sirius yelped and quickly spun around. "Harry!" he whispered angrily. "I get it. It worked. Let me in."

Sirius kept turning his head trying to remember where Harry had cast the spell. He thought it was on this hill, but he wasn't even sure of that anymore.

Harry snuck up behind Sirius and wrapped a hand over his mouth before he could yelp. He modified his voice and snarled, "I'm going to kill you, blood traitor."

"You know you still smell like Harry so it's not all that frightening," Sirius idly commented.

"Well how bout this then," Harry said with his voice back to normal. He turned Sirius to face the right direction and whispered, "The secret square is on the hill."

And just like that out of nowhere, Sirius saw two plush recliners miraculously appear before his eyes. "Nice. You can cast the charm, be the secret keeper, and stay here?"

"It'll last long enough for this," Harry explained as he plopped into one of the conjured chairs while Sirius settled into the other. "But if we wanted it to be permanent then you're often better off with some distance between the secret keeper and the secret."

"But I thought Albus-"

"Don't think too hard on it," Harry interrupted. "It's a picky fickle charm that can vary depending on a multitude of factors, even the caster. But as long as I don't stray too far from here, I can keep it up no worries. And as long as you don't scream loudly, we can talk without whispering. The sound won't escape the charm," Harry said as he pulled on the handle of his chair and reclined back. He let out a small sound of contentment.

"Ahh," Sirius agreed as his chair extended and he joined Harry in a relaxed reclining position.

Harry resisted the temptation to dig out a notebook. "Normally, I'd be writing this down."

"Really?"

Harry nodded. "It's one of the uglier habits I've picked up. But I don't think we need to carry around physical evidence of crimes we've yet to commit."

"And it gives you an excuse to be lazy."

"That too," Harry said. "So what we know is that they're going to be out at a dinner party Saturday evening. That gives us four days to idiot-proof this plan. Let's start with the wards we can identify from here."

They broke down the details that they could on the wards. Harry wasn't sure, but thought that all of the wards had been taken down and put back up when they were last cast, as they blurred together into one giant set. Once they'd gotten as far as they could without crossing or manipulating the wards, Sirius stood up to stretch his legs.

"Well I guess that's it," Sirius said with a grin.

"That ain't it."

"It's not?"

"Get comfy, Padfoot," Harry chided. "We're going to be here for a little while."

Sirius sighed. "But I'm hungry. And don't give me any crap about dog biscuits."

"We need to know more before just showing up Saturday night."

"Need is such a strong word."

"You know we could easily get around this by just grabbing Parkinson, feeding him veritaserum, and obliterating him."

"No!" Sirius snapped.

"Shh," Harry shushed as several birds nearby flew away.

"No," Sirius repeated in a quieter voice. "What you're talking about is typical Death Eater thuggery. I don't want to be that guy. We're above those sorts of tactics. We're thieves not trolls with wands. Hell if we were just going to cheat our way to a score, we could just blast the place to kingdom come, wards and all. Toss up our own quick apparition and portkey wards and scavenge through the wreckage. No, forget that. I want to be proud of the work we do. It should have elegance and artistry to it."

Harry sat back at Sirius' intensity and his example scenario. "Blast and scavenge, huh. Thought about it much?"

"Twelve years in prison," Sirius shrugged looking back towards the Parkinson manor. "The mind wanders."

Harry snickered. "I agree on distancing ourselves and avoiding their tactics. But if we're going to do this right, then we gotta do the homework. So it's either now or later. And later adds another trip here, and I'll need to cast another *Fidelius*. And we'll have to wait then too."

“No, let’s do this now,” Sirius agreed, twisting a knob on his Omnioculars, and looking towards the home. “Heat signatures show the two Parkinsons and I believe one house elf.”

“We’ll probably have to stun and obliviate the elf. I hope that’s not too thuggish for you?”

Sirius handed the Omnioculars to Harry. “Not at all. Because Death Eaters would never suspect that we’d go to that much trouble over an elf.”

“No one else lives at home, right?” Harry asked looking at the heat signatures.

Sirius shook his head. “Pansy lives with Draco and she’s an only child. Well, there are rumors there was a squib son that they banished to some other country, but those are just rumors. And even if they were true, I doubt the kid they never wanted is going to choose Saturday night to drop on by the old homestead.”

“Does Pansy ever drop by?”

Sirius grabbed the Omnioculars from Harry and answered. “Doubtful. But we wouldn’t have to worry anyways since she and Draco are attending the same party.” Sirius was fiddling with a couple dials on the Omnioculars and smiled dangerously. “It comes out in a conversation that I happened to record. Take a look.”

Harry accepted the Omnioculars and watched the prerecorded conversation. There were three women around a table under a gazebo. It wasn’t even noon yet and they were halfway through a pitcher of sangria.

Harry blinked as the image suddenly shifted and the ladies’ robes visibly faded until they were completely translucent. He leaned back and saw Sirius smiling at him.

“Turn it up so I can hear,” Sirius pleaded.

“These things get audio?”

Sirius nodded wondering how else Harry was going to listen to the conversation. "It's the orange dial."

Harry twisted the dial on the volume so that they both could hear the recorded conversation. Harry stuck his eyes back on the Omnioculars and saw the three women appeared completely nude, alternately leaning forward to share gossip with the others. "Are they going to be naked the rest of the way?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Good work, Sirius."

"Shh," Sirius scolded. "Here's the important stuff."

"Melinda darling," one of the women explained. "I hate to be bearer of bad news, but I thought you should know there's a vicious rumor going around that Draco walked in on Pansy while she was with that Goyle boy."

"Rumor," Melinda Parkinson scoffed. "It doesn't matter even if it is true. Not since Pansy walked in on Draco with the Crabbe boy."

The three gossips shared a giggle that didn't help at all with the taste of bile in the back of Harry's throat.

"Lucius' disappointment in having a poofster for a son is completely hypocritical," Melinda Parkinson continued. "Narcissa told me it was a miracle of magic that he managed to touch her long enough to make Draco."

One of the other women snidely added. *"I heard she's on her fourth wand now."*

They all seemed to giggle again and refill their glasses.

Harry continued to watch, entranced by nakedness of the female form.

"You're all coming Saturday, right?" The first woman insisted. "Aunt Edna's donated some very fine wines to celebrate her grandson."

The women all nodded.

"I may have to drag Alexander, but we'll be there."

"Pansy's coming isn't she?" Melinda clarified.

The woman nodded. *"You know how the Malfoys must be. They send a house elf to RSVP every time."*

Harry leaned back, having seen enough when Sirius pointed at him.

"Keep watching, there's more."

Harry felt something was fundamentally wrong with himself when he hesitated to look at naked women. He saw one of the ladies lean forward and grin. *"Have you seen the two new Lord Blacks?"*

Harry couldn't help but grin when all three women leaned back and proceeded to fan their faces and whistle in appreciation.

"You remember that man I couldn't keep my eyes off of at dinner?"

The ladies had remembered that tale given the way they gasped and giggled. *"Which one was he?"*

Melinda smirked. *"The shorter one with the scar."*

"Oh that scarred one reminds me of a teddy bear. I swear I just want to hug and mother that man so much," one of the women said with a small bark at the end.

"He is definitely cuddlier than the other."

"That scarred one's hair is a mess. But the tall one, now he is dishy."

The recording ended there and Harry handed the Omnioculars back to Sirius. *"How do they know so much about us?"*

"I am the dishy one, aren't I?" Sirius agreed.

Harry frowned. *"Were pictures taken of us when we went shopping?"*

Sirius nodded. "Probably. And from what I could tell, it's seems there's some sort of newsletter."

"A newsletter? Death Eater trophy wife quarterly?"

Sirius shrugged. "It sounded like a neighborhood association, but without the actual neighborhood and more muggle-hating."

"Whoa," Harry said standing up quickly. "I think Parkinson just left, or at least a tracer on him did."

Sirius twisted the knob back to heat signatures and looked in the home. "I only see one human sized heat signature. I think you're right. He's gone."

"We may be able to get out of here, earlier than I thought," Harry explained as he began to transfigure a dry rotted log.

"What are you doing?"

"Making a garden gnome," Harry said as he was reshaping the log to resemble the small pest of a creature.

"Why?"

Harry looked over at Sirius. "Because my gnome is going to set off the wards and we're going to watch and see what happens."

"Would gnomes trigger those wards?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't see any sign of gnomes around here, so I'm guessing something in that muddled mess will go off."

Sirius nodded quietly and was using the Omnioculars to watch the house.

Harry's transfigured gnome was tossed across the boundary and the entire wards flickered for a moment.

Harry waited, counting the seconds in his head. "It's been over a minute."

“No movement inside,” Sirius stated when suddenly there was a pop just a dozen feet to their right.

Stephen Parkinson had apparated right near where the two of them were sitting in a pair of conjured recliners. Only the magic of the *Fidelius* charm left them completely invisible to all of the Baron’s senses.

They watched him stroll down towards the wards where he spotted the twitching garden gnome. He grabbed the creature by its ankle and threw it high up into the air well beyond the end of the manor’s wards. He rested his wand over his forearm and was following the gnome’s descent with one eye closed. Satisfied with his aim, he let fly a vicious blasting curse and the transfigured log exploded in a gory shower of gnome bits.

Parkinson didn’t even go inside or check the wards before apparating away.

“That was close,” Sirius exhaled finally.

“Not really,” Harry argued. “But I think I got enough. You?”

Sirius had had enough over an hour ago but asked in confusion, “What’d that tell you?”

Harry smirked. “That told me he trusts his wards. That told me they’re not tied into the house elf. That told me they’re not tied into his wife. That told that he likes to apparate in from a bit of a distance rather than right next to the disturbance, and even then, it took him a moment to locate where it had happened. And mainly that told me that we can do this.”

Sirius grinned happily before pleading, “Food now?”

Harry grimaced at the reminder of the annoyances he associated with a long day spent horcrux hunting. “Yes, food.” Harry vanished the chair he had been seated in while Sirius vanished the other. They removed every trace of their presence and Harry tore down his *Fidelius* charm. With a soft pop they apparated away with a solid plan to return in four days.

At the Langella family manor in southern Scotland, the Parkinsons were arriving fashionably late. On this Saturday evening, it was the place to be for everyone who's anyone in the close knit world of elitist pureblood society.

But at the Parkinson family manor in northern Wales, two ancient and noble Lords were still struggling with adrenaline issues.

"Come on Padfoot, settle down."

"This never happens to me."

"Lots of people get performance anxiety. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

Sirius frowned. "Have you ever?"

Harry snorted. "Not bloody likely."

"Bugger off."

"Just settle down and quit putting so much effort into the spell," Harry calmly instructed from the other side of the ward.

Sirius took a deep breath and dropped a reflection net over the sensors.

The ward in between them disappeared without a sound. Harry walked across and slapped his godfather on the shoulder. "Nice work. See? It's easy."

"Come on," Sirius urged. "Let's see what you can make of that ward knot."

They'd been able to plan for the first three distinct wards, but the next wards had been too integrated to identify in their preliminary work.

Harry's eyes went crossed looking at the thick ward knot. "Let's just give it a little more juice..." he said as he began to feed a small amount of magic into it. Without any visible changes, Harry tried to

increase the amount of magic he was feeding into it and was a touch overzealous.

“Back, back, *get back!*” Harry ordered while grabbing a hold of Sirius with magical arms and dragging him backwards nearly into the ward behind them.

Sirius saw the wards quickly grow and fill the space they had been standing in moments ago. “Never happens to you, huh?”

“Moving on,” Harry deflected. “What do you see here?”

“No goblin wards,” Sirius said looking at suddenly clearer magic. “We were wrong about that. This first ward... it doesn’t look right. The color’s off.”

“Good eye,” Harry agreed. “And it’s because you’re seeing two wards that are extremely close together.”

Sirius leaned forward and noticed there were two definitive levels of clarity, one about an inch and a half behind the other. “So we gotta figure out a way that gets by both?”

Harry shook his head. “The darker one inside is probably the only one Parkinson’s paying any attention to. It’s an area ward that is cast and bound inside the other ward. Kind of like blowing up a balloon that thing is filling most of the space inside. We’re not even going to touch that one.”

Sirius tried to focus through the wards and look further. “It looks pretty solid to me. Unless we’re going to apparate past wherever it ends?”

“Nope,” Harry said looking closely at the gap between the wards. He got down on the ground and was staring deep into the wards with one eye squeezed shut. “I’d bet anything the ward doesn’t extend inside the house, but still. Apparition and portkey are based on blood. Those wards are undoubtedly a lot older and harder to break.”

“There’s less than two inches between the wards and I can’t see a gap at the ceiling.”

Harry lifted himself up and dusted himself off. "It's hard to see but there is a gap up there. My flood bump contracted the area ward just slightly and expanded the barrier ward a touch. But we're not going over the area ward. We're going under it."

Sirius leaned back. "We gotta dig?"

"Nope," Harry said with a grin. "You got the potions belt I gave you, right?"

Sirius nodded.

"Shrinking potion. Just go a drop at a time, because I'm not sure how much the Norton's Brew will boost the effect."

Sirius took the first vial and grabbed onto his bag, hoping the preparations they'd done were going to extend to this effect. He dripped a little of the potion onto his tongue and swallowed. He breathed out a sigh of relief to discover the preparations held and his clothes, wands, and bag all shrunk respectively with his body. He just kept shrinking and shrinking until he was less than an inch tall.

Harry leaned down at the little Sirius and snickered. "That size looks perfect. How many drops was that?"

A squeaky little voice shouted at Harry, "Three, I think. Merlin, this is undignified."

Harry copied Sirius' dosage and put three drops of the potion onto his tongue. He also shrunk down along with all of his belongings until he was just about Sirius' size.

"You're taller than me!" Sirius pouted.

"I'm like a foot taller than you, midget."

"More like a millimeter."

"Which at the moment is about a foot respectively."

"Why though?"

Harry shrugged. "Different sized drops I guess. Anyways, now you need to figure out a way to get us past the first ward and we can probably make it to the house through the gap left in it's contracted state."

"Are you kidding?" Sirius complained. "At this size, the house is like ten kilometers away."

"Well if you'd remembered what I said, you should have your broom shrunk in that bag. Won't take more than a few minutes flying at top speed."

Sirius looked away, scratching his head. "You said a lot of things and yeah, about that broom..."

"Fine," Harry said. "We can both fit on my broom. But we still need past this ward. Any ideas?"

Sirius frowned looking closer now that he could see it separate from the area ward inside. "Looks like it picks up on any magic crossing it, any person crossing it, and is that animagus detection?"

"Yup," Harry said. "Which is sometimes a good thing, but not too helpful right now. Inanimate transfigurations and no magic should work. But that means no summoning." Harry was mumbling to himself trying to think of a quick way around this one. "You know how to reverse transfigurations on yourself, right?"

"I've always had to turn into Padfoot first before back to normal, but yeah."

"Good, because I can't," Harry explained. "And you need to wait until I'm across as well before transforming, okay?"

Sirius nodded and readily accepted the transfiguration Harry was performing. Where once had been the elder Lord Black now was a magnet half as big as Sirius had been.

"You're going to need to just send a strong finishing spell at me. Don't worry about overpowering it. It's sort of a medical spell I'm doing, so you won't hurt me. And since we used the potion and not a spell to

shrink, then I won't grow suddenly either," Harry explained knowing the Norton's Brew meant Sirius could hear him. He picked up the heavy magnet and tossed it just on the other side of the thin line ward.

He then recalled the seemingly useless spell he'd accidentally stumbled upon while studying healing magic. Not quite his finest hour, Harry had one day decided to combat boredom by celebrating each new spell he learned with a shot of firewhiskey. It made learning a ninth new spell that day harder than it needed to be. Oddly enough the wand motion diagrams still worked even though he had been unaware the book was upside down. What right side up had been a painless clotting charm managed to be a curious piece of self-transfiguration when performed inverted. He also remembered the half a day he spent stuck that way too.

It was with the sound of a muffled gunshot that Harry turned himself, clothes, and satchel into a small bullet. His wand clattered to the ground while the bullet was quickly drawn in by the strong magnetic pull. It slid across the wards undetected and smacked into the magnet with a *clack*.

A soft pop and the magnet was replaced by a black dog that was just over a quarter of inch tall. The quick shift had the effect of launching the bullet into the air and towards the ward it had just passed.

Sirius didn't have time to transform as the projectile arced through the air. The dog lunged forward and caught the bullet in its mouth, just barely staying on the proper side of the magical sensor.

The dog trotted away from the wards and dropped the bullet onto the ground. It rolled to a stop by his foot. The bullet was covered in dog slobber and it showed. Another pop and Sirius Black was standing there, wand in hand. "*Finite!*"

The bullet let out a puff of smoke that smelled like gunpowder, and Harry was left there covered in dog slobber. He made a pained face and cleaned his robes of the mucus and mouth juice Padfoot had left all over him. "*That... was nasty.*"

"Could've been worse," Sirius shrugged. He saw Harry looked towards him and added, "I almost swallowed you."

Harry quickly banished that thought from his mind and looked over at his new ash wand on the other side. "I forgot that the wand falls to the ground when I do that spell. We'll just pick it up when we come back this way. I've got my old wand still."

Harry reached into his satchel and pulled out his broom. He removed the shrinking charm and the broom grew to its normal size, relative to the bonded shrinking potion. Realizing Sirius was going to have to ride with him, he shifted his satchel from off his back hip to hanging over his belly and in his lap. "You're in back."

Sirius shifted his bottomless bag that he felt was a terribly improper receptacle for plunder and booty. He swung his leg over the bristles and slipped in behind Harry. He scooted forward and wrapped his arms around Harry's abdomen.

Harry felt as awkward as Sirius, judging from the squirming and frequent shifting they were both doing. Harry took off through the small gap between the thick area ward and the ground. He was flying low, swerving around obstacles in their path, ignoring the fidgeting of the man with his arms around him.

"Don't you think maybe I should do some of the driving?" Sirius shouted to the side of Harry's ear. "Or all of it?"

"No."

"Are you sure? Maybe we should try me up front."

"There are two ways to fly here, Padfoot," Harry explained. "This is one of them."

"How about we try the other way?"

Harry thought Sirius would have known better than to suggest that, but called up a couple magical arms. They quickly lifted Sirius off the broom and inverted him, leaving him hanging in the air by his ankles as Harry continued pushing the broom at near top speed.

"Point taken," Sirius yelled out, tucking his hands under his arms so they wouldn't drag below.

Harry set Sirius back onto the broom behind him and felt his godfather scoot closer. The sweat on their bodies made a distasteful smacking sound when Sirius nudged forward one last time.

Sirius made a mental note to never forget his broom again.

Harry made a mental note to always pack two brooms.

Finally they arrived at the end of the large full ward hanging over their heads and were presented with a watery red ward on the front door. Just as Harry had expected, the area ward didn't spread inside the house, which meant once they were inside, they'd be home free.

"I don't think I've ever seen one like this," Sirius commented.

"Me neither."

"Is that bad?"

"Nope. Because I think I know what it is. And I think we may just want to trip it."

Sirius merely looked at Harry rather than voice the obvious question.

"Follow the trail of magic and check the heat signature," Harry said. "I think this might be a house elf ward. And that it may not be tied to anything that the Parkinson's would know about."

Sirius agreed with Harry's assessment but had to add, "You're such a nerd."

"Let's trip it, cancel our shrinking charms, and I'll get the elf from behind." Harry explained. He raised a hand to halt Sirius' snickers. "And yes I realize what I just said."

"How about this: I'll transform just as we get across and you toss the antidote to the shrinking potion in my mouth. Dogs and their dirt are practically mortal enemies of some house elves. I'll lead it away and then right back to you, where you're ready to, you know, get it from behind."

Harry agreed and quickly flew them across the shimmering red ward in a gap near the doorjamb. With a quick pop a house elf appeared looking around in confusion. Before it could look down and see them, the rapidly expanding form of Padfoot was grinning stupidly at the elf. The dog was more than twice the size of the elf and barked loudly. Sirius took off out of the foyer towards the sitting room on the right.

The house elf made a sound not unlike a *squee* and sprinted after the wayward dog. “No doggie, that’s a bad doggie!”

Harry packed his broom away and drank his own dose of counter to the shrinking potion.

“Slow down doggie!” the elf was shrieking from the other room in between the sounds of crashes and barks.

Harry positioned himself by the doorway as he heard Sirius coming back this way. The mutt came barreling into the foyer with the elf scrambling to keep up. Harry stunned the elf from behind before it had even turned around or noticed his presence in the room.

Sirius popped back into place feeling sufficiently pleased that he got to run around and break stuff that wasn’t his. He had his bottomless bag ready. “Shall we?”

“Split up and take anything that catches your eye,” Harry said. “Meet back here in ten to fifteen minutes.”

The two just smiled at each other, standing there calmly. Then without a word, they both sprinted off in opposite directions to see just how bottomless their bags really were.

Harry grabbed just about anything that wasn’t nailed down. All portraits they found they magically locked to their frames and took with them, whether there was anyone in the picture or not. Silverware, vases, magical items, the few bookshelves that passed for a library, anything worthwhile was grabbed by an invisible magical arm and stored down into his satchel.

Sets of furniture were shrunk, just about anything on display, was claimed. Harry was clearing out the Baroness’s closet—making sure

to leave the skimpy negligee behind—when he heard Sirius' loud voice echoing from a *Sonorus* charm.

"You might want to check this out."

Harry finished grabbing everything around him and hurried towards his godfather's voice.

"What do you got?" Harry said as he saw Sirius was stopped in front of a blank section of wall.

"There's a room here loaded with wards," Sirius explained, turning towards Harry. "You think we got time to get in there?"

Harry switched to a different magical sight spell and rocked back at the sheer volume of wards. "There's something in there that's completely isolated from all the magic out here. Those wards aren't letting anything ambient out." Harry glanced closer towards the anchor point. "Excellent! There's an animagus ward over the whole bunch."

"Why's that excellent?"

"Because an animagus ward is a degrading ward. It weakens all the others in a set, and that's why it's usually only added on when animagi can easily bypass the others. So a lot of times, we can just flood that one, get you on the inside, and you can put up a deflection net."

"Oh," Sirius said realizing that made a lot of sense and remarkably he had followed all of Harry's explanation.

"We had Professor McGonagall help us out a couple times when we knew it'd be easy for an animagus to get through a ward set."

"Why didn't any of you just become animagi?"

Harry sighed. "I've tried. I still try on occasion but I've struggled. Hermione said she was going to wait until she was done having children. She claimed it wasn't worth the risk. Whatever."

Harry saw where the animagus ward linked and he began to flood the ward with power. He poured more and more magic into it, and the wall flickered a large white rectangle.

Sirius transformed into his dog form and walked straight through the wall in a manner not dissimilar from the way wizards reach platform nine and three-quarters. Once he was through, Harry heard Sirius' voice clearly and stopped the flood of magic into the animagus ward.

"Sweet Merlin! You're never gonna believe this."

Harry pouted. "Deflection net, please?"

"Of all the things I thought I might see tonight."

Harry watched the magic flicker before suddenly he could see the soft gray glow of his godfather and the wards were bound in a bright yellow deflection net. Harry walked right through the illusionary doorway and saw Sirius just staring at the far wall in shock and awe.

Harry turned his head to see and gasped in surprise. "Oh my god."

"You think Voldemort knows?" Sirius asked Harry curiously.

"I'm kinda doubting it," Harry said looking around the hidden room, cataloging everything they had to make sure to take with them. "Sirius, do you even know what this is?"

Sirius jaw was still hanging open as he nodded. "It's a bloody huge muggle home entertainment center."

"No Sirius," Harry corrected with a ecstatic smile. "This is OUR bloody huge muggle home entertainment center."

Sirius felt all warm inside just hearing those words.

"We're going to have to shrink it, but let's try not to do any extraneous magic we don't have to on this stuff. You start working on the speakers over there. I'll work on the TV."

"*That's a TV?*" Sirius shrieked loudly.

Harry nodded.

Sirius stopped and calmed. "I had no idea they grew that big."

The electronics, the titles of music and movies, and even the shelves they rested on were all getting packed and stuffed into the bottomless bags.

Sirius was unplugging all the cables that were easily removed and gently shrunk down the massive speakers lining the room. "You know, I'm not really sure what all this is," Sirius paused and thought about his words carefully. "But it's big and I want it."

Harry chuckled. "It sounds like you know enough. Now come on. Let's finish all this up and get out of here. We've still got to go back through all the wards, including shrinking and flying again."

"I grabbed a bunch of brooms," Sirius announced showing off the one he'd stashed shrunken in his pocket.

They finished packing up everything, and upon exiting the room realized the solid warding job was to keep the magic out of this room, not to keep magic in the room from being detected.

Harry obliviated the house elf, despite the fact that it only had seen Sirius' animagus form. He placed the elf under a healthy sleeping spell and stuffed it into the closet by the front door. Sirius rubbed a salve into the restored broom. He pointed out he could rub quicker when he didn't hear Harry complaining that Sirius should've done this to his own broom and saved them both some time.

Just as they were about to leave, Sirius spoke up with one last request.

"I've figured out our calling card."

"Our what?"

"Our calling card. Something to mark this as the work of..." Sirius paused and added with a flourish, "the Death Eater Bandits."

“The what whats? Are you kidding me?”

“Okay we both know the pattern in robberies is going to be exceedingly obvious, so I figure let’s give them a little something to think about when they’re begging their Master for mercy, right? And stop looking at me like that. I know you’ve been thinking about it too.”

Harry bit his tongue and decided now wasn’t the ideal time to suggest Padamus Da Grim and the Sundance Kid. “We need to get going. If you want to leave a calling card, it’s fine by me. Just hurry.”

Sirius lifted a hand up and began to work on a complex illusion he’d be working on. With a final snap the illusion was locked and set into place.

“You’re a sick man, Padfoot.”

Sirius snickered. “Try and dispel it.”

Harry walked around the three dimensional bright green glowing illusion. At first glance it was the Dark Mark with a green serpent flowing through a skull. Harry was quite familiar with the Mark and spotted the difference right away. It was not the head of a snake topping the end of serpent in the skull’s mouth but a thick, green, veiny dildo.

Harry reluctantly sent a standard finishing spell at the illusion. It didn’t dispel the magic as intended, but rather the illusionary dildo began to vibrate and a humming sound filled the entryway.

Sirius was tittering happily. “It’ll do that every time.”

“This?” Harry questioned trying to keep the amusement off his face. “This is why you were too lazy to prepare your broom or read that book on wards I gave you?”

“Well worth the investment of my time,” Sirius grinned. “We’re leaving this thing at every house we hit.”

“Let’s get out of here before you start making fart jokes,” Harry said pouring three drops of shrinking potion onto his tongue.

Sirius made sure the illusion was satisfactory and took three drops of his shrinking potion. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the shrunken freshly appropriated and salve-covered broom. Before heading into the wards, he crossed his fingers and un-shrunk the broom. Sirius breathed a sigh of relief when it expanded to be normal-sized relative to Sirius and he quickly mounted the broom. Harry led Sirius back across the ward that would be ignored by the sleeping elf and speeding towards their exit.

They doubled there way back through all the wards again. Harry picked up the ash wand he'd been forced to temporarily leave behind and the pair took another antidote to their shrinking potions. Once they were safely at the crest of the hill in back of the manor, they apparated away.

It was another two hours before the Parkinsons arrived home and discovered the state of their manor. Baron Stephen Parkinson's fierce anger over the situation was only rivaled by his confusion. The Mark still floating in their entryway was perplexing enough. But he simply couldn't understand why someone would steal all of their toiletries, even his wife's, but leave behind his completely jinx-free toothbrush.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Twenty eight thousand galleons?"

"I know."

"But *twenty eight thousand galleons?*"

"Yes Sirius, I know."

"The furniture alone is worth that much. That was an original Van Eyk charmed boudoir in perfect condition. That's probably fifteen large on its own. And even in that shape, the Mage Cloak was still worth-

"Sirius?"

"What?"

"You're looking at this the wrong way."

"We're knowingly taking less than half of market price. How else am I supposed to look at it?"

"Sirius," Harry said making sure he had his attention. "We just made twenty eight thousand galleons."

Sirius frowned.

"With Felix we may not get as much as we could elsewhere, but we can trust him. He can spread these things around to make them untraceable. He offered to let us obliviate him-

"He only said that because he can break memory charms."

"It's symbolic. He gave us an Unbreakable Vow to never reveal anything about us. This wasn't just 'stuff' when we had it, it was evidence. And Sirius, I'll repeat it once more a little louder: *we are now twenty eight thousand galleons richer than we were yesterday afternoon.*"

"True." Sirius was fighting a smile.

"It's a good thing," Harry said with a nod. "We may get less money but we get more peace of mind."

"I know," Sirius grumbled scuffing his shoes. "It's just—"

"You know what might make you feel better," Harry interrupted. "Why don't we go spend a few thousand galleons?"

"Okay!" Sirius shouted excitedly. "Wait. Are we spending our own money or someone else's?"

Harry had to think about the question. "I suppose we are spending our own money. But, and this is an important 'but,' but at least we didn't *earn* it through an honest day's work like a sucker."

Sirius nodded slowly. "I can live with that."

"I'm not going to wear it," Sirius indignantly argued. "And you need to slow down before we go broke. Again."

"Sirius," Harry sighed. "What have I bought? Have you even been paying attention?"

"You spent three thousand galleons just to get a couple of trunks impenetrably charmed to us."

Harry nodded, urging for Sirius to continue.

"You spent twelve hundred galleons on just anchor stones, including some that cost over a hundred galleons for one hunk of rock!"

"Yup."

"A pair of chameleon cloaks for each of us. I'll admit they're nice, but at 400 galleons each, I don't think we both need an extra cloak that'll just collect dust in the back of our closets."

"You do understand that with the chameleon cloak, we don't have to buy any muggle outfits... ever?"

Sirius ignored him. "And now you just spent seventeen hundred galleons on a couple of necklaces."

Harry nodded. "I like to think of it as we spent not just me, but yeah."

"They're supposed to be for a husband and wife," Sirius bemoaned. "And they're ugly."

Harry frowned. "Okay, I'll admit they're... a bit gaudy."

"A bit?" Sirius questioned, unconsciously raising his voice. "Harry, inch thick gold chain is more than *a bit gaudy*."

"It's not that thick," Harry grumbled. "And you're a wizard, aren't you?"

Sirius shook his head. "It's the principle. You don't bang fat chicks just because they can cast a glamour."

"Do you even know what these necklaces are?" Harry said gripping a hold of the thick chain around his neck.

"Yeah," Sirius grimaced. "They're an old traditional wedding gift used for the consummation of arranged marriages."

"I suppose that's one use, but do you know what they do?"

Sirius shook his head.

"They allow a shared mental connection between the two people wearing them. It's for the purpose of creating a feedback loop of pleasure to ease the tension of the wedding night."

"Listen, I don't know what anyone told you about a godfather's duties, but—"

"Please don't finish that thought," Harry said with a wince. "The point is that it opens a mental connection between us. They allow us to communicate completely silently across distances. Think like the magical mirrors but without anyone ever knowing we're talking."

Sirius thought about it. "That would've been great for pranking. And tests."

“Exactly.”

“So instead of carrying a mirror like a Malfoy, we’re gonna wear jewelry that even a blind goblin would find hideous?”

“Everything I’ve bought for us is going to make our new hobby easier. That’s more than you can say. Why did you buy a photo development kit anyway?”

Sirius snickered to himself. “I might have come across a wizarding camera last night.”

Harry looked at him expectantly. “And?”

“And I want to develop the pictures.”

Harry frowned. “You’re that curious what pictures are on it?”

“Well I *know* one picture that’s on it.”

Harry began to put two and two together. “And of course you took a picture of your privates and can’t exactly drop those off at the Wizmart photo department.”

Sirius shook his head, inordinately proud of himself. “It’s not a picture of my boys. But good idea.”

“I hope you didn’t take any pictures that are going to be later described as the prosecution’s exhibit A.”

“Not exactly,” Sirius mysteriously answered.

Harry just looked at his godfather not wanting to indulge him at the moment.

Sirius was waiting. “Aren’t you gonna ask?”

“Why should I when you’re about to tell me anyway?”

Sirius couldn’t hold it and joyfully explained, “Fine. Don’t get all pillock-like on me. So you know I grabbed all their toiletries, right?”

Harry frowned. "I assumed you were just too lazy to buy your own shampoo and toothpaste."

Sirius shook his head. "I actually didn't clear out the *entire* bathroom." Sirius paused and couldn't have stopped smiling if he wanted to. "I left behind the Baron's toothbrush."

Harry closed his eyes. "Oh Merlin, Sirius. I've heard rumors about things like this."

"Now," Sirius continued ignoring Harry. "I knew you'd throw a hissy-fit if I sent them a picture of my bum, because then they'd know I'm a wizard, white, and have an adorable arse."

Harry thought hissy-fit wasn't the term he would've used but nodded silently.

"Then I just happened to walk past a perfectly good unconscious house elf, and I just happened to be carrying a wizarding camera, and I just happened to have the good Baron's toothbrush." Sirius shrugged helplessly. "So I did what any wizard would have done."

Harry was tempted to debate just what any wizard would have done but settled for silently pitying the poor elf.

"It was like Fate herself was slapping her knee, pointing, and begging, 'Do it again! Do it again!'"

Harry felt slightly ashamed that he was looking forward to the picture. "Let's go get the floo connected."

"Great," Sirius mockingly agreed. "We should throw more money away, this time at the government." He shook his head grumbling "Why can't the Ministry close on Sundays like the whole muggle world does?"

"Ow!" The little man behind the counter whined rubbing his arm. "Did you just throw a sickle at me?"

Sirius shook his head trying to fight a chuckle. Partly because it was horribly cheesy that Harry took Sirius' words literally and just physically threw money at the government, and partly because Sirius wished he had thought of it first. "Could be worse. He could've thrown a sickle at you."

The stocky wizard was confused. "What?"

"Good afternoon," Harry greeted paying no attention to the coin he'd just thrown. "We would like to get our ancestral home reconnected to the floo system."

"A reconnection? What's the address?"

"Number Twelve Grimmauld Place."

The short man had pulled out a thick ledger and was flipping through it. "That's London?"

"Yup," Harry said while entertaining himself by using his magical arms to nudge Sirius' hair. Sirius kept swatting behind his head thinking a bug was landing in his hair.

"Ah-ha! Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black."

"We prefer Ancientest," Harry corrected.

"Excuse me?" the man asked in confusion.

Harry maintained his deadpan expression. "Most Ancient is a muggle phrase. We're the Noble and Ancientest House of Black."

"I'm Lord Black," Sirius introduced with a nod. "My associate, Lord Black, never finished his proper schooling and you know how dropouts are. So he overcompensates and tries to correct people for no real reason."

The man had stopped flipping through the ledger and looked up at the two men. Completely flummoxed on how to respond, he just looked back down and went back to his search.

“Lord Black and Lord Black,” the man greeted while retrieving all the paperwork on Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. “I’ve heard about you two. I’m Greg Olson.” He was looking through the file and snuck a glance up at the two Lord Blacks. “Do you mind if I ask you how the House of Black is going to vote tomorrow?”

Harry turned towards Sirius wondering if he knew anything about this. Sirius shook his head and asked, “There’s a Wizengamot vote tomorrow?”

“The issue of Muggleborn Rights,” Greg explained. “I was just wondering if you knew or were willing to share which way the House of Black is going to vote.”

“I want to do it,” Harry said to Sirius.

“Alright, we can do it,” Sirius agreed and clarified, “We’re on the side that thinks muggleborns should have rights, aren’t we?”

“If you are,” Greg butted in, “then you’re probably *against* the issue they’re calling Muggleborn Rights this time.”

“Why?” Harry asked curiously.

“This steaming pile of legislation supposedly empowers muggleborns over their muggle relatives, but it also empowers the Ministry over their muggle relatives.”

“Ugh,” Sirius grumbled hearing the explanation and noticing Harry was listening intently. “Learning. Politics. Getting weaker...”

Harry frowned at Sirius and asked Greg, “What do you mean empowers over?”

“You should research the issue if you’re going to vote on it tomorrow.”

“Yes,” Harry agreed enjoying the frown on Sirius’ face. “We definitely should.”

“This is your fault,” Sirius warned leaning towards Greg. “I may forget a face or two, but I never forget a name, Craig Olson.”

“Greg,” Harry corrected.

“Greg,” Sirius continued without blinking.

Greg fidgeted under Sirius’ angry stare. “Let’s get an appointment scheduled for you to get your floo reconnected.”

“Can’t you just turn it back on from here?” Sirius complained. “Do you really need to come to our fireplaces?”

“Yes, we could,” Greg nodded. “But we don’t do that anymore.”

“Why not?” Harry asked curiously.

“It’s policy.”

“But why?”

“It’s policy, sir.”

“That’s not a reason,” Sirius argued.

Harry held up a hand, stopping Greg from responding. “Let’s set up the appointment.”

Greg looked down at the calendar on the front desk. “Looks like we have some time tomorrow.”

“We’ve now got the Wizengamot vote tomorrow,” Harry said. “How about the day after?”

Greg was shaking his head and making quiet clicking sounds. “Sorry, no open dates the day after. Nor the next day, nor the next...” Greg was flipping the pages of the calendar quickly, just shaking his head. “Here we go. Our next open appointment is August 18th.”

“August 18th?”

“Yes, sir.”

"Tell you what, Harry," Sirius volunteered. "I'll stay home and handle the installation while you do the research and homework stuff Greg assigned."

Greg cleared his throat and added, "For what it's worth, if you both wish to be able to augment your floo connections, then you'll both need to be present for the installation."

"Guess we won't be able to get in and vote this time," Sirius said patting Harry on the back. "We'll do lots of fun research next time. Don't worry."

"August 18th really is the next earliest we can do this?"

"Yes sir," Greg answered. "But if I may point something out?"

Harry nodded that Greg should continue.

"We only do appointments during normal business hours, and the Wizengamot vote is an evening session. They won't overlap."

Harry beamed a smile at Sirius.

Sirius was half growling. "Your name is quickly moving up my list, Craig."

"Greg," Harry supplied again.

"Greg," Sirius corrected.

Greg was beginning to wonder if Sirius was getting his name wrong purposefully. "So the appointment tomorrow, should I put you down for eight to noon or one to five?"

"One to five," Sirius answered immediately, while Harry responded, "Eight to noon."

The two Lord Blacks turned to each other and began to have a silent battle of wills.

"I'm sorry," Greg interrupted them. "You misunderstood me. The appointment times have to be flexible. I was asking if I should put you

down for tomorrow, yes or no. The appointment tomorrow is for eight to noon or one to five."

"Both times?"

Greg nodded.

Sirius frowned. "That's just cruel."

"That's our policy, sir," Greg answered happily.

"We'll take the appointment tomorrow," Harry said glancing at his watch. He looked at Sirius and said, "It's quarter past. You want to go bug Moony at work? We're going to need his help setting up some of our new toys."

Sirius nodded. "I probably owe him a dinner or two. And now I can afford it."

Harry turned towards Greg and asked, "Do we pay you now or when it gets turned on?"

"You have to pay at least your past due charges now," Greg assured them, finishing the paperwork. "And if you want it set up as joint custody, you both need to sign here and here."

They signed the paperwork, while Sirius was obviously fretting over ways their new necklaces and 'joint custody' could easily be misconstrued.

Harry and Sirius walked back to the apparition point in the Ministry. Sirius knew the way to Remus' office and apparated away with Harry following on his trail.

Sirius led him out of the tube station and down the street a half block. They entered an office building and walked up to a suite on the second floor. "Is Mr. Lupin in his office?"

The woman at the front desk just nodded without pausing in her phone conversation.

Sirius waved Harry to follow him and led him back through a small cubicle farm. He reached an office that said *Remus J. Lupin* across the door.

Sirius glanced at Harry and urged, "Do me a favor and close the door behind you." Sirius grabbed the handle to Remus' office and whipped it open, shouting out loud, "Scotland Yard! Get your hands up and face the wall."

Remus looked up suddenly. "What are you-"

"I said face the wall!"

"Oh god."

Sirius grabbed a hold of Remus and spun him around before shoving him hard into the wall and rattling a framed poster of a kitten.

Harry looked both ways and saw almost everyone was looking towards Remus' office. He let no emotion show on his face as he stared them all down before sharply closing the door with him in the office.

"Dammit Sirius," Remus grumbled easily breaking free from his grip. "I'm trying to work here."

Harry peered at the computer screen. "That's a card game."

"I didn't say I was succeeding at working, just trying to," Remus haughtily retorted.

"And what would your bosses have to say about this?"

Remus plopped back into his chair. "Who knows? They might give me another promotion."

"They gave you one already?" Harry inquired. "I thought you didn't know much about computers."

Remus nodded. "A couple months ago there was a free seminar on our products for any employee who wished to take it. Everyone in my

department wanted to go, including me. But the seminar was during the full moon, so I couldn't. When I got back to work on Thursday, I discovered everyone else knew a lot more than me about computers. And apparently for that reason, they promoted me to Senior Consultant."

"Because you know *less* than the others," Sirius clarified.

Remus shrugged. "I don't understand muggles any more than I understand wizards."

Sirius glanced at Harry and back at Remus. "You ready to sneak out of here?"

Remus paused to consider the question while closing his computer game windows. He hopped up and opened his office door to address his gossip-loving colleagues. "I'm not in any trouble. These were just a couple of my friends playing around. Julie, is McAlister here?"

Julie looked up from her desk. "Is McAlister ever here?"

"What about Maddox?"

Julie shook her head. "She went home over an hour ago."

"Alright, thanks," Remus said closing the door to his office again. He pulled on the cord that shut his blinds. "You got something fun for us to do?"

"We need your help on a little project," Harry explained.

Sirius added, "And I wanna buy you dinner."

"You? Buy?" Remus asked in surprise. "Are you sure?"

Sirius smirked, "Well I am a little buy-curious."

"We came into a little money and need your help," Harry interjected. "Everybody wins."

Remus nodded and waved the two men towards him away from the window in his office door. "We can just apparate out from here."

Harry blinked half-expecting they would need to kidnap Remus to get him to skip out on work. "Won't they notice you never left your office?"

Remus shrugged. "I wouldn't be surprised if they think I'm just working late."

Sirius tapped his chin. "You know this whole work thing doesn't sound quite as bad as I'd expected."

"I prefer our new jobs," Harry argued with a smile at Sirius.

"Hang on," Remus said looking at the two grinning Lord Blacks. "You guys got jobs?"

Sirius and Harry exchanged a glance just before they both apparated away. "Meet you back at Grimmauld Place."

"No way," Remus repeated for the sixth time, shaking his head in amazement. "They were just going to throw this stuff away?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" Sirius grinned.

"This is a really nice robe," Remus said enjoying the feel of acromantula silk. "I mean really, *really* nice. Normally, I'd refuse your generosity, but I can see you stumbled across plenty of them."

"I know!" Sirius cheered.

"You guys must be the luckiest blokes in the world," Remus commented while he and Sirius were arranging where to put all the new electronics. Remus was explaining the various parts while Sirius just nodded and didn't even try to pay attention.

"Dammit!" Harry swore as the ward stones flared up and died. "I'm still not doing this right."

"Are you following the instructions correctly?" Remus asked from behind a quickly growing mess of wires and cables.

“Yes,” Harry answered. “I’m doing the spell exactly the way the book says. But it’s not working.”

“Try your other wand,” Sirius suggested with a shrug.

Remus stuck his head out and glared at Sirius. “The wand he’s using won’t make any difference in the magic.”

“Hot damn!” Harry cheered. “Sirius I could kiss you right now if that didn’t mean I’d be admitting you were right.”

“Hah!” Sirius smirked at Remus. “I told you.”

Remus just went back behind the TV and ignored Sirius.

Since the spell was working, Harry cast sticking charms on the rest of the ward stones and affixed them to the four corners of the ceiling and the four corners of the floor. The four walls, the floor, and the ceiling all needed the spell cast on it, isolating this particular room off from the magic of the rest of the home.

Remus came back around to the extra long couch and had three different remotes in his hands. “We’re ready whenever you are.”

Harry had just finished casting the spell for a sixth time and was inspecting where the magical boundaries met. “I think we’re good.”

“Here goes nothing,” Remus said pointing the remote at giant television while the two other Lord Blacks collapsed into the couch on either side of him. The screen flickered to life and had warning text stating, ‘Warming Up...’

“No way,” Remus cheered. “It works.” He turned on the DVD player and saw it light up. “No way!”

Sirius glanced at how excited Remus was and commented, “This isn’t exactly the stimulating sort of show I was looking for.”

The screen had finished warming up and was a royal blue, exclaiming it was looking for an ‘input signal.’

"If there's a disc in the player, it should have just started up," Remus explained. He looked down at the first remote for the television and began to fiddle with the buttons. "Maybe I need to-"

"AAH!" Sirius shrieked as blaring loud music came from all directions around him. All three men had their hands over their ears and yet continued to try and communicate.

"Is it supposed to be that loud?" Harry screamed over the noise.

Remus shrugged, fiddling with more buttons. "I think so."

"Maybe a silencing charm," Sirius was mumbling as he took out his wand.

"No!" Remus snapped grabbing the wand from Sirius' hand. He chucked it out into the hallway. "Don't cast magic on the electronics."

"I'm pretty sure you can turn the volume down," Harry shouted over the orchestral song and movie's opening credits.

"How?" Remus shouted back, showing the remote to Harry.

Harry looked at it. "Perhaps the arrow buttons labeled Volume?"

"Oh right," Remus agreed and quickly lowered the volume to a far more acceptable level. "Sorry about that."

"Shh!" Sirius scolded slapping Remus.

"Excuse me?" Remus said when he saw Sirius hadn't even looked towards him.

"I'm trying to watch this, I don't want to miss it and you keep talking," Sirius explained while clearly enraptured by the screen.

Remus hit pause.

"What? No!" Sirius snapped. "You broke it. Fix it, Moony. Fix it."

"I paused it," Remus explained and hit play followed by pause again.

Sirius huffed and tried to grab the remote, but Remus pulled his hand away. Sirius whined, "Give me the wand. You don't know how to work it right."

"If you think it's a wand, then it's clearly not safe in your hands," Remus retorted.

Remus let out a slightly feminine shriek when he felt pokes on both the left and right sides of his belly. He dropped the remote in reflex as an invisible hand grabbed it and pulled it away.

"Why don't I hold the remote, while you two children wrestle for it," Harry said keeping the remote up in the air and out of their reach.

"You're on!" Sirius agreed, grabbing a hold of Remus and taking him by surprise.

"Padfoot, he wasn't being sincere. He was calling you childish," Remus complained despite being held in a half nelson.

"That's the talk of a loser if I ever heard one," Sirius grumbled as Remus' werewolf strength quickly turned the tables on him.

Harry just rolled his eyes and hit play on the remote.

The two grown men, who were wrestling on the floor, stopped and just looked up at the giant screen. Neither had bothered to extricate themselves from the other's grip. They were both simply entranced at the wondrous technology of muggles and the tale unfolding before their eyes.

Harry was stifling his chuckles at the fact that Remus and Sirius were still holding each other and watching the movie. He summoned Sirius' camera and snapped a few shots when they gripped each other tightly in moments of fright and surprise. Before long Harry also got caught up in the movie.

"You guys here?" Tonks' voice came from the foyer.

"Upstairs," Harry called back suddenly realizing they'd been watching a movie for over twenty minutes.

Remus and Sirius were still on the floor, neither even aware that Harry or Tonks had said anything.

“Holy crap!” Tonks exclaimed at the sight of the giant telly.

“Shh!” Remus and Sirius both shushed.

Harry hit pause on the movie.

“No!” Sirius whined. “What are you doing?”

Remus suddenly realized his predicament. “Padfoot. Could you take your arm off my waist please?”

“It’s stuck between two pillows.”

“We don’t have any-”

“Gah,” Sirius said quickly pulling away.

Tonks looked at Harry. “Do I want to know?”

Harry smiled at Tonks. “I took pictures of the lovers’ embrace on the floor.”

Sirius plopped himself back on the couch and yelped, “Hey! That’s my new camera, you thief.”

“You found a camera too?” Remus asked in surprise. “No way!”

“Speaking of thieves,” Tonks grinned. “Last night someone cleaned house at Parkinson Manor. Potter’s been moaning about it all day.”

“Hmm,” Harry said without conviction.

“Hmm,” Sirius echoed innocently.

“I only mention because you just happened to find a camera around the same time someone stole a camera from the Parkinsons, along with the vast majority of their other earthly possessions,” Tonks said glancing at the massive muggle home entertainment center. “It’s curious timing.”

"This stuff is probably all stolen!" Remus suddenly realized. "I mean the odds of you guys just finding all this stuff in one place the same night as a major robbery have to be astronomical. You did say you found it all in the same place, right?"

"Hmm," Sirius said before Harry poked him in the belly. "Oof."

"Yup," Harry said with a wide smile. "Found all of it in the same place."

Tonks saw the nice robe her adoptive father was wearing and smirked. "And just what else did you find?"

"Tons," Remus answered for them. "They got a whole..." He stopped and turned towards the two Lord Blacks who were inspecting their surroundings and whistling nonchalantly. "You didn't just find anything at all, did you?"

"Doubt it," Tonks said through her snickers. "Unless you count finding things around Parkinson Manor."

Sirius looked at Harry and asked, "How long are we supposed to act innocent?"

Harry deflated and sighed. "Well you can stop acting now."

"You guys stole from the Parkinsons!" Remus yelled in outrage.

"Yeah," Sirius answered with a firm nod.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?"

Sirius looked at Harry and shook his head. "No, not really."

"It's not so much that we wanted to quote-unquote *steal* from them, as it is that we wanted to remove some of the Death Eaters' resources," Harry feebly explained.

"And reallocate them to our pockets," Sirius added with a grin. "Why are your panties in such a twist, Moony?"

"I don't know," Remus said still unable to keep his voice down. "But it's wrong."

"If we let things like 'right' and 'wrong' get in the way, then the terrorists have already won," Sirius sagely argued.

Harry got the distinct feeling Sirius wasn't the most skilled debater before turning to face Tonks. "To be honest, I wasn't sure if they were even going to report it. Did they manage to dispel the calling card in the entryway?"

"You guys took everything," Tonks added. "They *had* to report it. And no, the floating dildo was still there when we arrived, which by the way was getting a lot of discussion on what to call it. I think the frontrunner last I heard was the After-Dark Mark, though Rockwell was insisting that it should be called the Dirk Mark for some reason. Personally, I think-

"Tonks," Remus interrupted.

"Right," Tonks said as she realized a dildo discussion in front of her adopted father and the two dimension traveling knuckleheads couldn't possibly end well. "Anyways, they left it up for the investigators. The DoM captured the wand signature from the mark and it wasn't on file."

Sirius frowned. "Did you at least ask Baron Parkinson some uncomfortable questions?"

Tonks shook her head. "He was away on *business*, or so we've been told. He left the missus to deal with the DMLE. Are you sure Parkinson is a Death Eater?"

"Harry?" Sirius asked.

Harry nodded. "As certain as I can be."

"Was this a gut feeling or did you see the mark?"

“Snakes can sense the serpent magic of the Dark Mark,” Harry explained. “Parkinson had it. ‘It leaves a stain on the soul’ a particularly poetic cobra told me once.”

“That’s a useful trick,” Tonks said with a low whistle, “detecting the Dark Mark.”

“I can’t detect it,” Harry clarified. “I’m just one of the few people in the world who can talk to the ones who can detect it. And before you even ask, you don’t have to worry. We’re not going to be reallocating from anyone until after we’ve confirmed they’re branded Voldemort cattle.”

“Wait,” Remus jumped in. “You’re going to do this *again*?”

“We finally get new jobs and you’re trying to get me to quit?” Sirius said shaking his head. “Moony, I’m disappointed in you.”

“It’s a not a job, it’s a crime,” Remus said looking over at Tonks. “And come to think of it, you’ve implicitly made us all accomplices, including a respected Auror.”

“That’s a good point boys,” Tonks jumped in. “I can’t just turn my head the other way.”

“Thank you,” Remus nodded glad to have some support.

“Certainly not when the old guy here gets himself such a fine silk robe and I’ve got nothing to wear to help you celebrate your new jobs.”

“Well we’re going to have to do something about that,” Sirius grinned back as Remus’ head dropped in disappointment.

“Come with me, Auror Tonks-Lupin,” Harry said swinging an arm over her shoulder. “I think we can locate a wardrobe or two in your size. Or maybe some jewelry that befits a member of the Black family.”

“Now we’re talking,” Tonks agreed.

Harry gave her a playful squeeze of the bum, adding, "Who knows? We may even figure out a way to celebrate where having nothing to wear is the appropriate attire."

Remus sighed as Tonks and Harry walked away. "We were good people before we met you two. Honest, hard-working magical citizens."

Sirius slung an arm over Moony's shoulder imitating Harry's earlier action. "Maybe, but you weren't having this much fun either."

"True," Remus admitted with a smile.

"And why do you even care so much about us thieving from the folks you'd openly consider the enemy?"

Remus smirked. "I don't care. But someone needs to disagree with you two before you try to overthrow the government."

"That's tomorrow," Sirius assured him as he picked up the television remote. "Why don't you show me how to make the thing louder with this muggle wand?"

Remus grinned. "You want to watch the rest of the movie?"

Sirius nodded. "That and I figured you'd want to make sure to drown out any noise coming from Harry's room right about now."

"Okay, that's it," Remus insisted. "You really need to learn a thing or two about fathers and their daughters."

Sirius could always tell when Remus was ripe for riling up. "Well I think your daughter may be the one learning a thing or two."

Remus clenched his eyes shut. "It's about common courtesy and basic propriety. Things you just don't say, to certain people, even when they're obvious."

"You know we picked up a whole lot of really old musty smelling books," Sirius teased when he saw Remus' eyes light up. "I only

mention it because there's a chance that right now Harry and Tonks are having sex."

Remus growled softly.

"At this very moment, his penis could be in her-"

"Give me the muggle wand and shut up," Remus snapped, figuring if he couldn't beat him, he should join him. And make sure to beat him later much harder with a big stick.

CHAPTER NINE

“Harry,” Sirius whined. “Stop reading about the Wizengamot and entertain me.”

“I can’t believe this stuff,” Harry said shaking his head. “You know we can settle disputes with duels? I don’t think the charter has changed in about a thousand years. There’s even a wielder of the Sovereign Saber!”

“There’s a sword?” Sirius asked curiously.

“Yeah,” Harry explained. “Whoever’s got the saber has the right to interrupt any proceedings at any time for any reason. And they must be heard.”

“That does seem a bit... medieval,” Sirius said. “Can you stab people with it?”

Harry shrugged. “What good does wielding the Sovereign Saber do if you can’t stab the guy next to you when it tickles your fancy?”

Sirius had a very thoughtful and intelligent response to Harry’s question but they were interrupted by a knock at the door.

“It’s about freaking time,” Sirius yelled, marching to the front door. “Do you have any idea how long we’ve been waiting...” He wrenched open the door and discovered a curvaceous young woman with a tool belt hanging loosely on her hips. She wore a half buckled pair of overalls covering a tight soot-covered white t-shirt. Sirius’ face split into a smile and he finished his question “...for you to walk into our lives?”

She was popping her chewing gum and decided to blow a bubble while eyeing Sirius up. The bubble she was blowing burst and she licked the gum from her upper lip. “Sorry about that. You need a floo reconnection?”

Sirius pulled the door open wider and waved her in. “Either that or it was just something we said to get you in the door.”

She tried to ignore his advances and asked, "Where do you want the primary fireplace and how many others do you want active?"

Sirius closed the door and flashed a innocent grin. "I suppose that depends on how good you are with your tools."

Harry looked up from his copy of *A People's History of the Wizengamot*. "In here," Harry called out answering her first question. He pointed towards the large hearth. "That's our primary fireplace. The only other two we need are the two Master bedrooms."

"You have two Master bedrooms?" she asked while glancing over her shoulder at Sirius.

"The Manor actually provides one for each Lord Black," Sirius said leaning against the side of the mantle while the young woman climbed into the fireplace. Sirius was happily checking out the visible parts of her body while she was banging around with her tools. Sirius loudly explained, "When you finish up with this fireplace, I'll show you mine. Common courtesy would be for you to show me yours."

"Uh-huh," she commented skeptically.

Harry was just shaking his head and poking Sirius for being shameless.

The young woman leaned out of the fireplace and flirted right back at them. "Lord Black and Lord Black, I'm ready for you in here. Bring a wand."

"Please, call me Sirius," he announced sidling up next to her. "And what should I call you?"

"I'm Sindy with an S."

"Yes you are," Sirius agreed.

"You're just keying in the wand signature, right?" Harry clarified without getting up.

Sindy nodded, wiping the soot off her hands, accentuating her chest. "Yeah but it needs to be in your hand."

"That's alright," Harry said. "You guys look cozy in there. I got it from here."

"Are you sure," Sindy questioned. "Only those keyed into the primary can affect the other fireplaces on the account."

"What's the matter Sindy with an S? Don't think I'm enough Lord Black for you?" Sirius grinned pressing his wand tip into back of the fireplace.

Sindy grinned back. "I'm quite certain you're too much Lord Black for me, Sirius." She saw Sirius was already resting his wand in the right spot but was surprised to see another wand floating opposite it waiting to be keyed in. "What's that?"

Sirius saw where she was looking and answered. "That's Harry's wand. And Harry's holding it, so go ahead and key us in."

She didn't question it and activated the floo network for them.

"That it?" Sirius clarified pulling back his wand when she nodded.

Sindy watched the other wand float out of the fireplace and zoom over towards Harry. Harry hadn't even looked up from his book and just raised his left arm into the air. The wand slid right into the wrist holster and Harry's arm came down. The page in his book turned itself without Harry ever noticing his audience.

"Come on Sindy," Sirius said as he picked up her tools off the ground. "I think I've got something in my bedroom you'll want to see."

Sirius and Sindy walked past Harry, and Sirius mumbled out of the corner of his mouth, "Show-off."

Sindy gasped, turned around, and slapped Sirius across the face. "If you pinch my ass without permission again, I'm going to write up a report and you'll *never* get connected to any floo in this country."

Sirius just shook his head, trying to ignore the not so quiet snickering coming from Harry, and preparing to argue his innocence when he instead asked, "So this permission thing, how's it gonna work?"

Sindy was smiling in spite of herself. "You're incorrigible."

"You have no idea," Harry commented loudly still nose deep in his book.

"Thank you, Harry," Sirius snapped back, disappearing towards the bedrooms with Sindy.

Ten minutes later the two were coming back down to the living room, shamelessly flirting and giggling the whole way.

"You can't sign Lord Black twice," Sindy said with a laugh. "There are two different wand signatures on the account, and they each need their own authorization."

"Help me out here, Harry," Sirius requested with a hopeful look. "Sindy here is getting off her shift after finishing up with us. And I'm trying to convince her to take a few more hours on the clock and spare us the agony of going to the Wizengamot vote tonight."

"I said I would if my boyfriend-

"Don't even give me that boyfriend cock and bull story unless you're ready to prove you feel nothing for me with a kiss."

"Sirius, can I talk to you for a moment?" Harry said pulling the older man into a corner away from Sindy.

Harry glanced over and saw Sindy was pointedly ignoring them. He looked at his godfather. "Okay first, I'd avoid mentioning bull cock in the same four word span as boyfriend when you're chatting up a girl."

Sirius nodded at the advice he could've used a moment ago.

"And second," Harry glanced over at Sindy again. He looked Sirius in the eye. "How old do you think she is?"

Sirius took a glance and answered, "Twenty-six or seven maybe? Why? You don't think she's thirty do you?"

Harry rolled his eyes at the look of fear when Sirius said the word thirty. Harry leaned to the side and called out, "Hey Sindy? Remember I'm an ancient and noble Lord who can verify this with your boss when I ask, how old are you?"

"Eighteen," Sindy answered uncertainly. "No nineteen. I turned nineteen a couple weeks ago."

"Thank you," Harry said with a smile.

"And my real name is Marge," she admitted out loud in a oddly honest moment.

Harry looked back at Sirius. "Nineteen. For a man who wants to keep making fun of the old Remus, you're not exactly sparkling with virtue at the moment."

"Nineteen," Sirius repeated incredulously looking her over again. "I'm like-"

"Old enough to be her father? Twice her age? On the sort of diaper duty that reserves you a place in hell?"

"You're being a big help here," Sirius nodded sarcastically thanking Harry.

"I'm not saying if a pretty minnow jumps in your boat to throw it back," Harry explained. "But maybe you shouldn't be fishing for the ones just spawning for their first time."

"I used to know a mermaid who dirty-talked a lot like that," Sirius replied. "And yes, point taken. Obviously I was overestimating her age. Blah, blah, blah. We'll still go play with the icky politicians tonight."

Harry walked back over to the woman. "Sindy, err... Marge, where do you need my signature?"

“Here and here,” she pointed to two spots on her work orders.

“Thanks for setting us up,” Harry said going back to his chair and book.

Sirius smiled at her. “I’m sorry to say the evil, anal retentive Lord Black has insisted that we attend this evening’s Wizengamot session. Which means I’m not going to be able to steal you from your boyfriend tonight. But now you know my floo address for the next time he disappoints you and you want to get back at him.”

Sindy walked over to the freshly connected floo and tossed in some floo powder. “You’re such a dirty old man,” she said with a wink before loudly announcing, “Ministry of Magic.”

Sirius watched her disappear. “I’m a dirty old man, eh?”

“Easy way to fix that,” Harry said closing his book and standing up. “Take a shower. We should drop in and visit the Chamber of Lords lounge before the Wizengamot convenes.”

“There’s a lounge?” Sirius asked.

Harry nodded. “And hookers there to service you.”

“Well alright,” Sirius agreed, finally seeing the benefit of establishing a political presence.

“Harry,” Sirius commented as the two walked into the private chamber. “I see a bunch of old men. Perhaps we need to clarify the definition of hooker.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Harry added. “You might have misinterpreted my meaning when I said there would be hookers here to service you.”

“You mean when I took your line ‘there will be hookers here to service me’ to mean that there would be hookers here to service me?”

“Yup,” Harry agreed. “That doesn’t sound anything like my meaning.”

“How do you do?” A man greeted walking up to them. “Lord Thomas Hooker. My friends call me TJ. Would I be correct in believing you two to be the infamous Lords Black?”

“I hardly think we’re infamous yet, Lord Hooker,” Sirius grinned shaking the man’s hand. “But the day’s just getting started.”

“TJ,” another man greeted as he approached. “Don’t scare the new guys too much. Lord Jason Bennington. My friends call me JC.”

“Lord Black,” Harry answered shaking Lord Bennington’s hand. “My friends call me Harry and not to worry. It’ll take a lot more than a room of stodgy, old men to scare me.”

“Did you just call me stodgy?” A man interrupted puffing up himself with pride.

“PJ, must you always posture?” Lord Hooker said with a grin.

“Lord Peter Potter,” He introduced sticking his hand out. “My friends call me a right old bastard.”

“Well if that’s all it takes, I wouldn’t be surprised to count you as a friend someday,” Sirius answered shaking hands. “Lord Black. My friends call me Sirius and this is Harry, another Lord Black.”

“I also get called PJ a lot because ‘right old bastard’ just takes too long to say sometimes.”

Harry was shaking hands with a great uncle he never knew he had when he felt a powerful presence enter the room.

“Speaking of stodgy old men,” Lord Potter mumbled under his breath.

Harry spun around and did his best to focus on his frustratingly weak *Occlumency* shields. “Chief Warlock Dumbledore, I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Lord Black,” Albus replied, his eyebrows rising in surprise at the emblem on Harry’s shoulder. “Or should I say Warlock Black? It’s been a while since I’ve seen a declaration patch worn.”

The other Lords looked at Harry curiously, having not noticed or recognized the importance of the patch.

“Yes, well, I figure it’s my first day here,” Harry answered with an innocent shrug. “What better way to kick off my foray into the world of wizarding politics than with a little friendly stabbing among dignitaries?”

“A friendly stabbing?” Albus repeated as his eyes twinkled.

Harry was waiting for the moment he felt any sign of *Legilimency* but it never came.

“How often do you find stabbing... friendly?” Albus asked.

Sirius saw Harry and Albus were almost staring each other down. “Well, there was this swordfish the other day.”

Three loud gong sounds rang throughout the Chamber of Lords, ending all conversation.

“Civic duty beckons, my Lords and Ladies,” Albus said loudly.

The large group walked together out from the Chamber of Lords and into the half-filled Wizengamot general assembly. Sirius led Harry over towards the pulpit reserved for the Black hereditary seat. Sirius crossed the boundary on the alcove and the center chair magically grew into a slightly raised almost throne like wingback.

Harry followed right behind Sirius and when he crossed, there was a bright white flash attracting all attention their way. What had been one impressive wingbacked Lord’s chair was now replaced with two identical regal seats.

“Great,” Harry said blinking his eyes. “People are staring at us and I’m seeing spots. A little warning might’ve helped.”

Sirius plopped down into the chair and was rubbing his own eyes. “I didn’t know that was going to happen.”

"Please everyone, be seated," Albus instructed from his commanding position in center of the first row. "Yes, we are graced by the presence of not one but two Lords Black for the first time and we will have a proper introduction to them *after* the vote."

As soon as the proceedings began, several people remained standing, waiting to be recognized. Albus called on the most senior member of the Wizengamot first, Lord Burke.

The skinny old man rested both hands on his cane, and imperiously announced, "I challenge the appointment of two Lords from a single house. It creates irreparable conflicts."

"You are certain you wish to challenge?" Albus clarified looking over his glasses at Lord Burke.

Lord Burke nodded.

"Lord Black, Warlock Black," Albus called. "You have been challenged. How do you respond?"

Harry stood up while Sirius just leaned back and rested his feet on the front banister of their pulpit. A few people were muttering over the lack of respect Sirius was showing.

Harry swept his gaze across the hall looking at everyone and lingering on the people still standing. He grinned deviously and began. "Now I suppose I can easily rebuke this amateur and sophomoric challenge by pointing out we still only one have vote per recognized wizarding line whether it's delivered by a Lord or an appointed representative. Having two Lords is no different from having two appointees of equal stature insofar as any vote in the Wizengamot is concerned."

Harry was relishing in the stern looks and cold stares headed his direction. "But I'm not going to do that, because as challenged and declared Warlock, I wish to earn the right to wield the Sovereign Saber."

Albus hid his surprise to find that there really could be some stabbing this evening. "The Sovereign Saber?" he repeated. "You realize no

one has made any public mention of the Saber in all my years of service?"

"Sounds like it may be a historic evening then," Harry retorted with clear determination. "Because I want it."

Albus sat back tiredly. "This is why you wear an emblem of declaration?"

"That's correct, Chief Warlock."

"You do realize some could argue you are just wasting our time," Albus said. "We are more than willing to hear any reasonably brief comments you wish to make no matter whether you carry a sword or not."

"And if my comments aren't reasonably brief?" Harry replied showing he wasn't budging.

Albus heard the murmurs from the crowd and was stroking his beard. "I don't suppose you know who is currently in possession of the saber?"

Harry nodded. "I believe it is the Donnelly hereditary seat, as Lord Charles Donnelly wielded the saber at sessions as recently as 1782."

"1782, that's a little outdated," Albus said clearly not amused. He turned towards his right. "Sir Tapper, you're the representative for Lord Donnelly and the Donnelly family, are you not?"

"Yes sir," the lone man in a far less throne like chair of a private pulpit answered.

Albus knew it was fruitless but asked, "Did you perchance bring the Sovereign Saber with you?"

"Begging your pardon Chief Warlock, but until a minute ago I didn't know any Sovereign Saber existed."

"I surmised as much," Albus nodded and turned back to Harry. "I am sorry we are unable to accommodate you Warlock Black."

“Come now, Chief Warlock Dumbledore,” Harry grinned dangerously again. “I don’t think we have to throw in the towel just yet.”

“Oh?”

“Wizengamot charter states that appointees cannot wield the saber anyway, so there’s nothing Sir Tapper could have done with it even if he had brought it. But I assumed you of all people would know that the forger of the Sovereign Saber was also the swordsmith who made Godric Gryffindor’s famed magical blade. And he made it with many of the same charms, notably including the ability to be called.”

Harry glanced around as he explained, “In the absence of its current owner the Chief Warlock may call it and present it to a requesting noble line. Lord Donnelly may challenge to get the saber back the next session he attends, but if no one wishes to challenge my right to the blade by requesting it themselves, then I should be permitted and presented the Sovereign Saber.”

“You certainly did your homework on Wizengamot charter history, didn’t you?” Albus agreed, willing the Sovereign Saber to appear before him.

Harry nodded and ominously added, “Suffice it to say what I’ve learned has been disturbing.”

“Very well,” Albus said lifting the jewel encrusted but otherwise rather plain looking blade in the air. “Warlock Black has requested the Sovereign Saber. Is there anyone who wishes to dispute Warlock Black’s claim?”

“A dispute on this matter is settled by a blades-only duel, correct?” A fit young aristocrat inquired. When Albus nodded, he quickly announced, “Yes, I wish to dispute the Sovereignty of Warlock Black.”

“As will I,” another man quickly stood.

“And I,” a witch stood up announcing.

“I’m sorry Baroness Pince,” Albus answered. “But you wear no declaration and are unable to dispute this. Baron Switzer and Lord

Fullbright, your objections are noted.” Albus raised his wand into the air gave it a couple of twirls, creating two plain swords sticking in the ground in the central floor of the Wizengamot.

“Baron Switzer, Warlock Black,” Albus said waving his hands to large open area below. “Since neither of you has the right to the saber yet, you will both duel with the blades provided.”

“Rules?” Baron Switzer sneered as he walked down to the courtroom floor.

“Unfamiliar with your Wizengamot charter, Baron?” Harry answered before Albus could. “Well, the rules are we swing our little poking sticks around until one of us yields or dies. Of note is the fact that the rules didn’t provide for unconsciousness, and thus if you pass out I’ll have to kill you to win.”

Albus saw Baron Switzer look up to him and added, “What Warlock Black is overlooking is that the Chief Warlock can intervene and declare a winner when the outcome is no longer in doubt.”

“But he doesn’t *have* to intervene,” Harry answered arriving at the first sword jutting up out of the stone floor. Harry wrenched the sword loose and was whipping it back and forth in the air. “Unless he really, really wants to.”

Baron Switzer saw how inexpertly Harry was swinging the sword and thought he’d have a good chance. He pulled up his blade and held it steady, aimed straight at Harry.

Albus was reluctant to say it, but both combatants were staring back at each other silently. “Begin.”

Baron Switzer was an accomplished swordsman and began to circle Harry.

Harry just stood there while he was being circled and the Baron just kept slowly moving closer in.

With a lunge, Baron Switzer swung his first strike at Harry.

Harry saw the attack coming and surprised everyone by using his free hand to catch the blade and grab a firm hold of it. He was cheating of course and it was the strength of a magical appendage that kept the strike from slicing his hand in two and instead only split the skin. A shallow cut was seeping blood, and Harry merely looked at it in annoyance.

The surprise on Baron Switzer's face showed and Harry took the opportunity to jab his sword straight at the man.

Baron Switzer twisted his body out of the way of the first two swings. He was unable to get Harry to release the Baron's sword.

"Hold still," Harry whined just before his third lunge connected solidly, piercing right through the man's armpit.

"Ahh!" Switzer's grip went slack and he'd let go of his blade in an involuntary muscle reflex.

Harry was still holding the sharp end as blood was dripping down his hand. He proceeded to poke Baron Switzer again with Harry's own sword.

The aristocrat gasped and shrieked, slapping a hand over his second open wound.

Harry just smiled and stabbed him once more hoping to avoid vital organs. "This is kind of fun."

Baron Switzer grunted and was sliced again rather shallowly. "Stop!"

"Do you," Harry paused and stabbed him in the thigh, "yield?"

"Yes, yes," Baron Switzer pleaded, as he was quickly losing blood. "I yield."

"Excellent," Harry agreed and stabbed the Baron in the foot. "Whoops. Sorry. That one was my bad."

Baron Switzer had crumpled to the floor as a couple men hurried down from the stands to tend to him.

Harry flipped what had been the Baron's blade, so he was holding it by the handle. He wiped his own blood off the sword and onto his cloak's sleeve. Once he'd sufficiently cleaned the blade, he used magic to launch it slicing through the air. It embedded deep into the wood of the chair just a few inches away from a seated Wizengamot member.

"Lord Fullbright," Harry said with a small bow. "I believe you were next?"

Lord Fullbright turned his head slowly to the blade that was still shaking back and forth from the sudden impact. He looked back at Albus and stated, "I think I'll retract my dispute for now."

"Understood," Albus agreed clearly not approving of Harry's barbaric actions. He waved his wand, vanishing both hastily conjured swords. "Warlock Black, I confirm you are the rightful wielder of the Sovereign Saber."

Harry mentally called for the enchanted sword and it appeared in his hand. "Thanks, Chief Warlock."

"Are you going to be challenging for my seat next?" Albus inquired watching Harry closely while Sirius just looked bored.

"Not today," Harry answered. "But we do still need to address Burke's challenge that-"

"That is Lord Burke to you, Warlock Black," Burke insisted angrily.

"Actually," Harry happily corrected. "The Sovereign Saber permits me to interject, interrupt, and demand to be heard at any time. You could beg me to continue to use your frilly little title, but the saber excludes me from the laws restricting speech and titles in all Wizengamot matters. Isn't that right, Albus?"

"You are correct, Warlock Black," Albus answered. "But I think perhaps you have made enough enemies for now."

"I'm just getting started," Harry said plopping back into his chair and kicking his feet up, mimicking Sirius' position.

Albus looked at the two Lord Blacks for a moment before addressing, "In any event, Lord Burke, I agree with Warlock Black's initial comments that the private dealings of a House are up to the House. And as long as the House retains a single vote, there isn't any legal precedent prohibiting more than one Lord of the family recognized by the Wizengamot. Do we need to vote on your challenge?"

Lord Burke shook his head irritably and sat back down.

"We have a vote before us," Albus explained. "The bill is Muggleborn Rights. We shall hear closing statements on both sides of the issue from Mr. Johnson and Madame Fillman."

"Excuse me," Harry blurted out happily. "Just one thing."

"Yes, Warlock Black?" Albus reluctantly answered.

"Since it seems like all the blood purists and traditionalists around here are very much in favor of this bill, and all the people that foolishly believe Muggleborns deserve *equal* rights are opposed to the bill, shouldn't we think about renaming it?" Harry said loudly. "I was thinking Muggle and Rights both sound fine, but what if we change 'born' into something more fitting like 'Hating Baby Rapist?' I know it's not quite as catchy, but Muggle-hating Baby Rapist Rights feels a lot more in line with the spirit of the bill."

"Thank you Warlock Black," Albus loudly replied, silencing cries of anger. "But renaming the bill is not up for discussion. The time for that has long since passed."

"Alright, just checking," Harry nodded while playing with the Sovereign Saber.

Albus ceded the floor to Mr. Johnson who spoke emphatically in favor of Muggleborn Rights, while Madame Fillman waited her turn to speak against the bill.

Harry tuned them out and turned to Sirius. "How are you holding up?"

"Maybe if I got to stab someone it wouldn't be so boring."

Harry tossed him the blade. "Be my guest. The House of Black and its Lord are in possession of the saber. Stab away with sovereignty."

Sirius was playing with the sword a bit and leaned over towards Harry. "Any thoughts on when or where you want to go back to work?"

Harry cast a small silencing charm around them and answered, "It's been two days."

"I know," Sirius admitted. "But I figure the work is going to get harder as we go, not easier."

"True," Harry said. "And yes, I've had some thoughts. As we speak, I've got a pair of small snakes working their way around figuring out how many marked people are in this room."

"Oh yeah," Sirius replied with a smile. "Are you that sure you're going to find any?"

Harry nodded. "Simmons and Darcy from the lounge are already on the short list."

"Speaking of short," Sirius attempted to segue. "What's up with you and Tonks?"

"Did Moony put you up to this?"

Sirius grumbled. "Moony doesn't even want to know. I get the feeling he was a little too overprotective when Tonks started dating. I think Tonks might have coerced him into a magical oath. So no, he didn't ask, this is just my own burning curiosity."

"We're just friends," Harry answered looking forward as Dumbledore had stood up to begin the vote.

"Friends?"

"Friends with benefits you could say."

"That's nice and all. Maybe you two can pass notes in the common room," Sirius interjected. "But I was looking for some details. I mean I've heard stories about metamorphmagi..."

"Stories, huh?" Harry commented. "Well, I wouldn't be surprised if they were all true."

"Not all of them," Sirius replied. "I know Andy and Ted didn't flip a coin and decide to raise her as a girl."

Harry bit his lip. "You know I don't think it's worth the risk to ask that one."

"So come on," Sirius asked. "Did Tonks make like Ginny and get the ghost off your back?"

"You know I haven't seen her in almost a week," Harry said. "She's probably due to appear at the worst possible time."

"So who'd you ask for?" Sirius insisted. "Hermione? Luna? McGonagall?"

"No, no," Harry said. "Nothing like that."

"You can't tell me she just looked like Tonks."

Harry shook his head with a grin. "Well not exactly. I mean there's something to be said for the ability to go from a blonde school girl to a redheaded French maid to a blue-haired high-priced hooker in a crotchless catsuit with fishnet stockings all without even changing positions."

"Outfits too?" Sirius was impressed.

"There was a perfectly good chameleon cloak hanging in the closet."

"That's why we got two. Brilliant!"

Harry saw people were being called on to cast their votes. "That girl has got one fantastic imagination."

"That *girl* is almost eight years older than you."

“She likes to go through almost every sort of fantasy you can think of just to see which ones elicit the strongest responses. And yes, this is *during*. She borrowed my glasses and did this stern librarian thing then she gave them back, morphed, and tried to sell me a box of cookies.” Harry paused and tried to remember where he’d left the cookies. “Did you know she can fake a pregnancy? Massive bulge of the belly complete with welcome and unwelcome swelling. She even pinned me to the ground and ordered me to call her *Dora the Sexplorer*. What’s that about?”

“You want to talk about names that are out there,” Sirius jumped in and related. “That one muggle girl, whose name I’ll never remember, she actually named my-”

“Wait,” Harry interrupted. “You’ll never remember *her* name, but you remember what she named your-”

“Yup,” Sirius answered. “You’d remember it too if you got christened *Lord Crotch, the Womb Raider*.”

Harry was unable to contain his snort. “Lord Crotch, the Womb Raider?”

“Yeah,” Sirius grinned. “I’m not sure I get it, but I think I’m going to order a plaque made with that name.”

“Lord Black and Warlock Black!” Albus Dumbledore’s magnified voice broke through their silencing charm.

“Something the matter?” Harry innocently asked, knowing Albus had been calling for them the last thirty seconds.

“How do you vote on the bill titled Muggleborn Rights?” Dumbledore asked in a quieter voice.

Harry glanced at Sirius and back. “Nay.”

“Thank you,” Albus said. “Lord Black votes nay. Baron Blackenshire?”

“Nay.”

Harry and Sirius tuned out the rest of the vote and continued to chat back and forth.

The vote finished and the Muggleborn Rights bill passed easily with sixty-four percent. Chief Warlock Dumbledore was saying the closing words of the session. "Traditionally at this point we would hear a few words from our newest members, but I am not certain that either Lord Black is paying attention right now."

"You'd like a few words?" Harry asked curiously.

"I don't believe there's anything in the charter you might have read," Albus mockingly answered. "But in the past, when someone new has taken over a seat, they would introduce themselves and maybe say a few words about any issues they feel strongly on. I think we'd all understand if you were unprepared for this."

Harry raised his hand as he stood up and began. "I don't think I need to prepare that much to introduce myself." He waved his hand back and forth at everyone. "Hello Wizengamot. I'm Harry. Though, I suppose in this room I'm Lord Black."

"Lord Black," Harry repeated. "I still think that's hilarious. A few years ago, I put on a ring for the purposes of warding a home I'd inherited. I just thought it was a ring. And then I find out it was the Black Family ring and it had accepted me as the new Lord. That's ridiculous. I just wanted to put up an apparition ward and suddenly that means I actually have a mildly important voice in one of the premiere governing bodies? That's retarded."

Harry shook his head as some people were muttering unhappily. "I did a fair amount of reading on the Wizengamot before tonight and I got to say this place is outdated and stagnant."

"I understand the idea that if it's not broke, then you shouldn't fix it. But I'm telling you, it's broke. Listen to me. I'm Lord Black and I have a vote. Something had to have gone wrong along the way for this to happen."

Harry saw he wasn't making any friends but that they were at least paying attention to him. "It's not that complicated. Hereditary seats

plus a growing rate of inbreeding does not a good judicial and legislative body make.”

“I’m not arrogant or foolish enough to believe I have all the answers. But if you try to feed me a plate of shit, I’m going to call you on trying to feed me a plate of shit. Like the bill tonight? That was a plate of shit.”

“But I digress,” Harry paused. “The short of it is that I consider it my civic duty to piss you all off. Thank you.” Harry sat back down happily.

“Thank you Warlock Black,” Albus tiredly replied. He looked straight at Sirius and asked, “Lord Black?”

Sirius glanced at Harry and pushed himself up to his feet. Sirius took a deep breath and began. “I’d imagine you all have taken notice of the fact that there are two Lord Blacks. And I don’t want to give off the impression that we are anything but a united front. So I will simply reiterate the shared opinions of the two Lord Blacks in my own words: Fuck you all very much.” Sirius smoothed down the front of his shirt and sat back down. “Thank you. And your mother twice.”

Albus huffed in frustration. “I think that’s enough for tonight. I call this session to a close. Good evening.” Albus banged a magical gavel to his desk and gathered up the parchments around him.

Sirius stood up and looked at Harry. “Shall we make a dramatic exit?”

“You can if you want,” Harry said. “I’m still waiting on a couple of reptilian delegates that wanted to keep an eye on the door.”

“Don’t sneak out on me,” Sirius warned as he exited the courtroom and ran into a number of reporters and photographers.

Harry briefly chatted with the two scout snakes as he slipped them into his pocket. He had just begun to wonder how long he could wait in the courtroom when Sirius bellowed, “Get out here, Harry.”

“What?” Harry came out quickly. “What’s the matter?”

Sirius grinned. "Nothing. But it's a better photo op with both of us. Smile at the camera."

Harry turned towards a group of four photographers and was blinded by flashes.

"Lord Black! Lord Black!"

Harry saw Sirius wasn't going to let him get away and figured he probably owed Sirius for coming tonight. He turned towards the shouting man with the quill and notepad. "Yes?"

"Lord Sirius Black indicated that you wrote your own introductory remarks," the reporter supplied. "Could you expound on your meaning when you said you consider it your civic duty to piss people off?"

"Now you're just twisting my words," Harry argued. "I don't consider it my civic duty to piss people off. I consider it my civic duty to piss off the back-ass-wards inbred idiotic geezers who think blood purity matters. Given the performance of the Wizengamot over the last couple centuries, I think it's safe to consider back-ass-wards inbred idiotic geezers is a fair description of the majority."

The reporter gulped and glanced at Sirius smirking. "Can I quote you on that?"

"Sure," Harry said with a shrug.

"Aren't you worried about backlash from the other more senior members?"

Harry shook his head. "Not really. They could try to make up some new laws, circumventing all of their precious ancient charter, but to do so would actually mean they're breaking away from outdated traditions, which is basically the point of goading them in the first place. Not to mention, they'd be validating me as an opposing voice to the blood purists. A voice they were unable to deal with."

The reporter was furiously scribbling down everything Harry said. "When you say blood purist, do you really mean Death Eater?"

"I'm referring to the political landscape, not a recent terrorist organization," Harry replied. "The problems of our society aren't the fault of the addle-brained extremists but the fault of lazy people doing nothing to improve the status quo. If you want a quote, use this: the wizarding government is run by a bunch of the stupidest muggles you can find, who just happen to be able to do magic."

"We're just muggles who can do magic?" A firm but feminine voice clarified. "All of us?"

"Madame Bones," Sirius greeted. "I'm sure Lord Black here meant to imply everyone but you."

"Lord Black," Madame Bones greeted. "A couple of old friends are waiting over there and were hoping to talk to you."

Sirius spotted two Unspeakables he knew by name and patted Harry on the back. "I'll catch up with you later Harry."

Harry leaned over to Sirius' ear and whispered, "Keep your necklace on if you need a breakout. And remember, you're a Lord now. Something you weren't last time they drugged, interrogated, and obliviated you."

"You worry too much," Sirius assured him.

Harry watched Sirius walk away when Madame Bones repeated her earlier question. "So muggles who can do magic, huh?"

"I may have exaggerated a bit for shock effect, but basically yeah," Harry argued. "Too many wizards and witches think themselves different from muggles and have an us-versus-them attitude."

"And you don't?"

Harry shook his head. "Like I said, we're all muggles. It just so happens that most of us who can do magic are completely ignorant of almost everything else in the world."

"That's a pretty unpopular attitude," Amelia Bones pointed out without disagreeing.

Harry shrugged. "Popularity only matters to elected officials. I'm content to loudly disagree with everyone. And maybe ruffle a few feathers, sleep with a few daughters. All the things my bloodline and magical ability entitle me to."

Amelia Bones really didn't want to like Harry, but she couldn't ignore he had annoying charm. "Good evening, Lord Black," she dismissed. "Do me a favor and try not to stab any other members of the Wizengamot tonight."

"You have my word that I will try, but it's this Sovereign Saber," Harry said hefting his new toy, swinging it dangerously close to the reporter. "It lusts for blood and I can only resist its call so long."

Amelia said nothing else as she turned away shaking her head and hiding a smile.

Harry got word from Sirius that he was fine but would be a couple more hours.

Tonks then decided it was her responsibility to the Black family to take Harry out and find him a piece of tail.

It was only about twenty minutes after they'd arrived at the wizarding bar before Tonks had ditched Harry. The drummer for Stubby Boardman's reunion tour was too dishy to ignore in favor of her self-appointed responsibility to the Black family.

Harry wished her well and moved over towards the bar, where he saw a very attractive and familiar face drinking alone.

"Can I get you another of those?"

Susan Bones looked up to see Harry smiling at her. "Sure."

Harry signaled the bartender and sat down next to her. "Why would someone as attractive as you be drinking here alone?"

"That's your line?" Susan asked unimpressed. "You buy me a drink, you sit down next to me, and you loosely wrap a question around an uninspired compliment?"

Harry sipped on his own bottle of beer. "Well now that I've seen your confidence, I know we're not waiting on the boyfriend to arrive. And I was needlessly worried about coming on too strong."

"You were going to come on stronger?"

"You really want to tee that one up for me?"

Susan laughed, unashamed of the color in her cheeks. "So what would have your line been?"

Harry sat his bottle down and stared right at her. He silently watched her until she finally turned and asked, "What?"

"You remind me of Celestina Warbeck."

Susan gave Harry a curious glance. "I look nothing like her."

"No, you don't look anything like her," Harry agreed. "You're much cuter, but I never said you look like her. Just that you remind me of her. Two things about you actually."

"Oh yeah?" Susan asked. "What two things?"

"First thing," Harry argued playfully. "First is that you both blush the same when properly embarrassed and slightly flattered."

"Are we speaking from firsthand knowledge here?" Susan inquired.

Harry smiled mysteriously and continued, "The second thing is that you both get a deep husky voice after your second orgasm." Harry grinned as Susan nearly choked on her drink. "See? There's that blush."

Susan had to look away as she felt embarrassed to blush this time. "You're awful."

"I try," Harry agreed sticking his hand out in greeting. "Harry."

"I know who you are, Lord Black."

"And I know who you are, Miss Bones."

Susan turned to him in surprise. "Now that is interesting. And here I was going to suggest we get to know each other a little better. But it appears we know each other already."

"I may know your name," Harry pointed out. "But I would appreciate the opportunity to count and catalog every freckle on your body."

"I don't have any freckles on my body," Susan retorted.

Harry tipped back the rest of his beer and set the empty bottle down. "Prove it."

Susan was watching Harry and found herself relishing in the way his eyes felt on her. She knocked back the rest of her drink and got up from the bar. "Okay."

"Really?" Harry's voice cracked before he could stop himself. "Let's just pretend I didn't say that. You ready to go?"

Susan nodded and accepted Harry's hand. She let him pull her side-along as they apparated away.

Harry woke up suddenly trying to determine what roused him. He felt the calming sensation of a warm body next to him and smiled in remembrance of the night before. His fond recollection of newfound carnal knowledge was interrupted by a sharp chill in a very sensitive area. He glanced forward and saw the covers were still in place. He decided that even with a comforter in the way, Susan Bones still had great curves.

Harry's eyes widened and he became far more alert when he felt the chill again in the exact same place.

Harry slowly tried not to wake up the young woman next to him as he lifted the sheets over his head to assess and evaluate the potential shrinkage situation.

Ginny frowned harshly at him as her head was the only visible part of her incorporeal body sprouting up from the mattress. When she caught his eye, she brought up her fist again and punched Harry in the crotch.

The chill made a lot more sense now, but somehow felt even colder. "Ginny! Stop that!" Harry whispered angrily while trying to rub some heat into his body.

"You slept with Tonks!" Ginny whispered back.

"Now's not really the time-"

"Sirius says you didn't even ask her to look like me!"

"Well there's only so much blood in my body," Harry argued. "And it's hard to think when the little head called dibs on the circulation front."

"I understand you're scared, Harry," Ginny continued softly. "I know you don't know how to handle love-"

"Oh for Merlin's sake," Harry snapped loudly. "I'm not scared of you!"

"Harry?" the voice from the other side of the sheets warily asked.

"Get out of here!" Harry reached out, slapped both hands on the top of Ginny's head, and pushed her down. He was momentarily shocked to see he had actually managed to push a ghost away. He didn't have a moment to consider the implications when he was reminded of more pressing issues.

"Are you talking to me or your penis?"

Harry pulled the comforter off and smiled up at Susan. He saw the cool room air had an immediate effect creating some enticing goose bumps on her body. "Sorry about that."

Susan shivered and pulled the comforter back down to cover her. "*Brrr*. It's cold."

Harry grinned and cast a warming charm around her. "I'm a big fan of low room temperatures where you don't want to get out from under the covers."

"As long as you're not scared of your penis," Susan smirked. "By the way, does it talk back to you?"

Harry failed to mask his embarrassment explaining. "I was talking to... well, the ghost between my legs to be honest."

"Mmm-hmm," Susan agreed fully turning around to face towards Harry. She propped her head up with her arm. "Sounds like a lucky ghost."

Harry felt a sudden icy chill connect with his loins again and he gasped. He hopped up out of bed and hurriedly put his pajama bottoms on. He pulled on his chameleon cloak and shifted it into a fuzzy terrycloth robe. "Why don't I make us breakfast? Are you hungry?"

Susan sat up a little and felt the thrill of Harry's eyes on her body again. "I am hungry," she admitted beckoning Harry closer with a finger.

Harry slowly stepped towards her, fearful that Ginny's head might pop up suddenly. "You want some eggs? Bacon?"

Susan grabbed the waistband of his pajama bottoms and pulled him towards her. Her chin was resting on his bellybutton as she looked up at him. "I was thinking sausage."

"Pork or Italian?"

"Shut up."

"Okay."

It was almost an hour later before they were both satiated and famished. They walked down the stairs and could hear sizzling sounds coming from the kitchen. Harry pushed the door open, calling out, "Sirius? Are you making... oh."

Sirius was fighting with a frying pan at the stove, and it appeared his date for the previous evening was wearing only a bathrobe while she sipped some tea.

Harry didn't feel any shame as both he and Susan were dressed in similar bathrobes, but he was a little worried about the woman's presence.

"Hey," Sirius greeted and pointed at the woman jumping to her feet. "You remember-"

"Susan!"

Susan had walked right behind Harry and eeped in surprise. "Auntie Amelia!"

Harry looked at Sirius and pinched the bridge of his nose. "We have *got* to work on our communication."

CHAPTER TEN

The two Blacks and two Bones all exchanged looks. The guests looked mortified while the hosts were doing everything in their power not to laugh or give in to the temptation to high-five each other.

Sirius caught Harry's eye and shrugged. "After your accusations of robbing the cradle, can you blame me for shagging such a vivacious cougar?"

Harry winced and translated, "I'm sure that was meant as a compliment, Madame Bones."

Amelia had been taking it as a compliment until Harry had called her Madame and shattered her illusions that the cougar reference didn't have anything to do with her age. She addressed her niece. "This shouldn't be awkward, Susan. You're a grown woman."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Harry agreed before he could stop himself. "Sorry. My mind's been in the gutter since Susan asked for my pants sausage."

"Harry!" Susan exclaimed while checking out Sirius and resisting the impulse to flash her auntie a big thumbs up.

"See? I did it again." Harry said happily.

Amelia found herself fighting a smile. "You did that on purpose, Lord Black."

"Please, call me Harry."

"Amy is fine casually, Harry, but if I ever find out you hurt Susan, I'd prefer that you remember me as the Director of Magical Law Enforcement," she said while calmly flipping through the Daily Prophet. She saw Harry was hesitant to respond. "What is it?"

"Amy, I, umm..." Harry kept his eyes pointed upward. "Susan, you want to tackle this one?"

"Your boobs are coming out, Auntie."

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Sirius exclaimed sitting down at the table while Amelia hastily covered up.

The four proceeded to have stilted conversation, awkward silences, and mocking playful barbs back and forth. It started when Sirius passed on the juice and exclaimed he was suddenly in the mood for milk. Amelia then got a cup of coffee and when asked how she took her coffee replied anything but black. Because apparently she tried black and found it unsatisfactory. Harry then passed his eggs and bacon to Sirius deciding it felt like a fresh melon kind of morning. Susan took a second helping of sausage because sometimes one just isn’t enough.

Sirius tried a bite of Harry’s melon and indicated it was too ripe for him. He claimed he didn’t like his melon so freshly plucked, preferring it a bit aged, once it’s softer and more flavorful. This was when the tension broke due to the fact that Sirius’ mouth was a step ahead of his brain and he kept using the word *breast* instead of *melon* among others.

Amelia couldn’t take it when Sirius asked her to pass the bacon and the penis.

A couple of frenzied, goodbye shags later and the two Lord Blacks were alone at Grimmauld Place. Harry was giving Sirius an earful in the muggle room.

“What were you thinking?”

Sirius shrugged.

“Padfoot! We have lots of stolen goods, including talkative portraits bound to their frames. And you invited the Director of Magical Law Enforcement to spend the night.”

“Well you invited her niece.”

“Who was a classmate of mine and isn’t responsible for arresting us.”

“A classmate?” Sirius grinned. “Did you and her ever...?”

"In the old world?" Harry said. "Nope. I never really had the opportunity as she got killed about a year after her aunt, who incidentally got killed about a month after you."

"But you wanted to, with her, right?"

Harry smiled as he fondly recalled, "She was the first girl in my school year."

"The first what?"

"The first girl to sprout," Harry took a deep breath and proudly finished, "jubbies."

"Sarah Morales," Sirius replied instinctively. "She was the first in my year. You never forget your first."

"So in answer to your question, yes," Harry agreed. "I had a bit of a crush on Susan. There were four or five girls in the DA that I may have been watching a bit closer than the other kids. She was definitely one of them."

"Was Ginny one of them?"

"Ginny was a friend I was watching close anyway. But that reminds me," Harry said turning towards Sirius. "Just this morning I was able to shove Ginny's head through the mattress. It was kinda moist and cold but she was solid to me."

"Further proof we're meant to be together," Ginny said appearing just behind Harry.

"Really?" Harry said turning to her. "And here I thought it was so that I could actually smack you all those times I wanted to smack you."

Ginny floated through the couch and rested herself as if she were leaning on Harry's shoulder. "Our little tiffs just make making up that much more fun."

Harry was trying to poke and push Ginny but his hand just passed straight through as normal. "How'd I do that earlier?"

Ginny shrugged. "Accidental necromancy?"

"There's no such thing as accidental necromancy," Harry grumbled. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Says the Soul-Mate-Who-Lived," Sirius added with a grin.

Harry stood up from the couch and grumbled. "I'm going to take a shower. Try not to seduce any high ranking law enforcement officials while I'm gone."

Ginny stayed there on the couch as Harry walked back towards his room. She grinned at Sirius. "He just needs to wash all that Susan off of him."

"I've not seen you in a while Ginny," Sirius replied settling down in the recliner across from her. "Last time we talked you promised me a good story."

"Right," Ginny said shifting her body to lie down on the couch. "A good story. Anything in particular?"

Sirius shrugged. "I remember you mentioning something about a *Dennis-slash-Denise*?"

"Oh! That *is* a good story," Ginny smiled thinking back to that day. "This was after Voldemort was killed. Harry had been trying to recreate some of the magic in the Exit and sort of unmade all of his loose ward stones from existence. So he went to Diagon Alley to pick up a bunch of new ward stones and was coming back through the Leaky Cauldron.

"He walked in through the back door and headed for the muggle side when a woman got up from the bar and stood in front of him blocking his path. She leant forward and whispered into his ear that she wanted to ravish him, right now."

Ginny snickered. "Harry examined this dark-haired smoldering woman who he didn't know, realized she was practically in heat, and quickly agreed. She suggested his place, but Harry said no. He

turned right around and got a room from Tom there in the Leaky Cauldron.”

Ginny repositioned herself and continued. “Those two went at each other like Pureblood Princess Parpie and her betrothed Heir Cleangood, *if you know what I mean*. Forty-five wet, sticky minutes later they were both exhausted and just lying there on the bed. You know that sweaty time afterwards, where you keep your distance and cool off. Well the woman still hadn’t given her name, but it was clear she recognized who Harry was. So while they’re just lying there, the alarm on her watch starts beeping and they turn to each other.”

“The look of horror on Harry’s face was priceless,” Ginny preempted. “Because when that watch beeped, it signified it had been an hour and Dennis Creevey’s polyjuice was wearing off.”

Sirius was quickly cataloging all the different ways to eternally mock Harry for this.

“But even funnier,” Ginny said through laughter, “was the look of horror on Dennis’ face when Harry Potter didn’t turn into his boyfriend Terry Boot.”

“I got the whole story from Dennis later on because all he could do right then was to keep apologizing over and over to Harry. Now stick with me on this tale,” Ginny assured him, “because it gets even better.”

Sirius briefly considered taking notes.

“So what happened was that Dennis and Terry were looking to spice up their relationship and managed to buy a few Harry Potter hairs off the black market. They were actually at the Leaky Cauldron to do a little role-playing. They went into separate bathrooms and while Terry drank a glass of Harry-juice, Dennis downed a glass of a woman who was supposed to be a surprise to Terry.”

“Unfortunately when Terry chugged his brew, he turned into a Harry Potter that was lacking a lightning bolt scar. That’s why it took him a couple minutes longer in the bathroom. And while Dennis, polyjuiced

to look like the waitress who took their picture on their first date, was waiting at the bar, the real Harry Potter just happened to walk in.”

“A couple minutes later while Dennis and Harry are putting up silencing charms in the room they rented, Terry has put the finishing touches on a glamour charmed scar for his forehead and is walking out of the bathroom. He looked towards the bar and didn’t see any woman who caught his eye. But wouldn’t you know it, right then, Terry’s aunt walked into the Leaky Cauldron.”

“Oh sweet Merlin,” Sirius gasped.

Ginny was giggling happily. “Terry, who everyone can plainly see is Harry Potter, walked right up to the woman he assumed was Dennis and said he wanted to ravish her, right then. She didn’t want to go back to her place, so Terry went up to Tom and asked for a room. From what I’m told Tom was very impressed and rented ‘Harry’ another room, just a minute or two after the first one.”

“Less than an hour later, Terry’s aunt had fallen asleep with the widest, most content smile on her face. Terry’s polyjuice then wore off and when his aunt, stayed his aunt, he flipped out. He grabbed all of his stuff and ran out of the room.

“Right in the hallway, Terry’s there with his clothes in his arms and he sees Dennis come sprinting out of the room next door. They look at each other and shriek at the same time: *I had sex with my aunt! I had sex with Harry Potter!*

“Terry and Dennis agreed to never play polyjuice games again,” Ginny finished gleefully. “And not two days later, the Quibbler ran a special front page article written by Betty Boot entitled *Harry Potter: Greatest Lover Ever*. There were enough juicy details to sell-out three re-printings of that issue.”

“That could only happen to Harry,” Sirius said shaking his head. “But what I don’t get is if Dennis and Terry wanted to pretend with Harry polyjuice, why’d they have to complicate things?”

Ginny smiled brightly. “Actually it was at Dennis’ insistence. Because, and I quote, ‘Harry Potter is the antithesis of gay. He practically oozes

heterosexuality.' Which, considering Dennis is the one who had sex with him, is especially ironic."

"I think I've autographed that issue more than the one proclaiming Voldemort's defeat," Harry said from the doorway. He was only wearing flannel pajama bottoms and was towel drying his hair.

Sirius didn't even know where to start rubbing this one in Harry's face. "So is this the real reason you wanted to live with me when you were thirteen? To take advantage of my sexy prison-fed body?"

There was a knock at the front door and Harry turned to go answer it. He reminded Sirius, "Don't forget I can kick your ass."

Harry draped the towel around his neck and opened the front door. "Hello," Harry curiously greeted two people he was not expecting to see. "Can I help you?"

"Lord Black," Peter Potter greeted. "I was hoping to get some opinions on a few political issues, if you or the other Lord Black had any time to talk."

Harry stepped back inviting them in. "Ahh sure. And call me Harry."

"PJ," the Potter Lord reminded. "And this is my great nephew, James."

"Jimmy," Harry greeted shaking the hand of the little brother he never had. "I think that's what Tonks said she calls you when your Dad's not around."

"Can I just say that calling the Ministry a bunch of stupid muggles was beautiful," James Jr. cheered. "It made my week. I saw Weasleys' Wheezes already had some t-shirts for sale with quotes."

Peter put a calming hand on James' shoulder. "If this is a bad time, Harry, we can talk later. Perhaps we could buy you lunch. The other Lord Black too."

Harry looked down and saw he was shirtless. "Oh no it's fine. I just got out of the shower a couple minutes ago. My cloak's going to be soaking in potion for another hour or so. I'm in no hurry."

"Morning Harry," was the call coming from the kitchen.

"Tonks?" Harry asked back. "Is that you?"

"Err... I'm not interrupting you, am I?" Tonks asked quietly when shirtless Harry walked up to her.

"Naw, you're fine. Come on in," Harry smirked. "Say hi to the Potters."

"Oh boy," Tonks said as her eyes widened.

"Relax," Harry assured her. "Your boss isn't one of them."

Tonks looked over Harry's shoulder and to the front entryway. "Jimmy? What are you doing here?"

"Uncle PJ managed to convince Mum it'd be educational," James Jr. said, clearly indicating he couldn't care less if it was educational.

"Sirius," Harry yelled up the stairs. "Get down here and say hi to the Potters."

There was a brief pause before a voice yelled back, "What the hell is up with your luck today?"

Harry firmly believed fate was a fickle bitch just begging to be tempted and wisely said nothing. He turned towards Tonks, James Jr., and Lord Peter Potter and opened his mouth when there was a knock at the front door. "Excuse me," Harry said to them and carefully peered around the door. "Amy. Long time, no see."

"Don't you start with me, Harry," Amelia said as she moved forward to be let inside. "I got one Lord Black notch in my bedpost already this morning. I don't need another."

Harry didn't quite know what to say, as he was certain everyone behind him had heard her clearly. Harry moved out of the way,

revealing Peter Potter smiling brightly. Harry's eyes glimmered in amusement. "Come on in, Amy."

Amelia Bones realized it was not just Harry present, but in fact Lord Potter, her Assistant Director's son, and Auror Tonks were all staring at her with grins. Amelia looked resigned as she smiled weakly back. "Oh this is fantastic. Actually, I think I'm beyond caring right now." Amelia just walked past the four others with her head held high. "If you'll excuse me, I need to go find my bra."

"It's okay, Amy," Sirius said from the top of the stairs. "Kreacher!"

The elf appeared as called.

"Madame Bones is looking for her-"

"I'll get it, Master," Kreacher replied, disappearing with a pop.

"I met you," James Jr. said as he recognized Sirius. "You're Lord Black?"

"I wasn't when we met," Sirius replied. "But I am now. PJ?"

Peter shook Sirius' hand and nodded. "I was hoping not to interrupt you guys, but it seems pretty busy around here."

Amelia found herself agreeing and asked, "What are you doing here, Auror Tonks?"

Tonks stopped smiling at the walk of shame and was reminded this scarlet woman was her boss. "I, kind of, ditched Harry last night. I wanted to apologize and find out how his evening went."

Amelia opened her mouth to respond when suddenly there was another knock at the front door. "Lovely."

"Excuse me," Harry said, turning back to answer the door. He once again slowly opened the door, identified the visitor, and greeted loudly, "Susan. Long time, no see."

“Listen Harry,” Susan just started explaining. “I don’t care if you did bite all the way through. Those are my lucky panties and I want them back.”

“Come on in, Susan,” Harry echoed his earlier words and moved out of the way to show five more people than she was expecting to see.

“Susan,” Harry cleared his throat and introduced, “You remember Sirius, and this is Tonks, and Lord Potter, and Lord Potter’s great nephew Jimmy, and of course-”

Susan reddened. “Hi Auntie.”

“Good to see you again, Susan,” Amelia grinned mirthlessly with a complexion almost as rosy.

“Not awkward at all, right?”

With a pop, Kreacher appeared with a bright blue lacy brassiere. “Your bra, Madame Bones.”

Amelia proudly accepted her bra from the house elf. “This is exactly how I pictured my day was going to go.”

Tonks smirked at Harry. “So your night, it went okay, it sounds like.”

“Hello?” a voice called out, knocking on the open front door. “Anybody home?”

Peter was impressed his second encounter with the Lords Black was proving to be even more entertaining than the first. “James?”

The latest unexpected visitor stopped in surprise. “Uncle Peter?”

“Dad!” James Jr. greeted happily.

“Boss!” Tonks chimed in just because.

“Assistant Director Potter,” Harry said evenly.

“You,” Sirius greeted coolly.

“Oh stuff it, Sirius,” Harry scolded and turned towards the front door. “Something I can help you with, Assistant Director?”

James saw his uncle was smiling brightly, his son was in good spirits, Tonks looked a bit nervous, and his boss was holding a bra and avoiding eye contact. “Have I come at a bad time?”

“Not particularly, no,” Harry said before ordering, “Kreacher, fetch Susan’s lucky panties please.”

Susan just reddened furthered.

“Yes Master,” the elf agreed, happy to be helping the pureblood women.

James looked at his uncle and son, asking, “Did you clear this with Lily?”

Peter and James Jr. nodded with certainty.

James glanced over all the faces again and decided to try and coax some information out of Sirius later. He was thinking perhaps when he wouldn’t have his family and boss as an audience. “I’ll come back some other time.”

He turned to leave and was blinded by a sudden magical flash.

“Wait!” A voice from the front steps called out. “Don’t waste film. That’s not a Lord Black. That’s just Potter, an auror.”

“The press,” Amelia announced, maintaining her unconvincing smile. “This is... this is *great*. You know, Sirius, you are quickly becoming the biggest mistake of my life that involved multiple orgasms.”

“Auntie!” Susan eeped.

“Amelia!” James scolded. “My son is here!”

Tonks sucked in a breath knowing exactly how true that was.

“Lord Black!” A woman called out as she walked in, pushing past James Potter. “I was hoping to interview both or either Lord Black.”

She looked around the room at all the smiling faces while her photographer followed her in. "Have I come at a bad time?"

"Hello Rita, Bozo," Harry said through clenched teeth.

Rita Skeeter had just licked the tip of a quill and was surprised that not only was she recognized, but also her photographer. "Lord Black?"

Kreacher suddenly appeared with some shiny black torn material. "Your lucky panties, Miss Bones."

Another flash indicated a picture had been taken. Only instead of wasting film on an auror, this time Bozo managed a shot of a shirtless Harry standing by Susan Bones holding her torn black silk panties, while in the background Sirius stood by Amelia Bones holding her bright blue lacy bra.

"Okay, that's it," Harry said taking charge of the situation. "Rita, take your photographer and go before I let the Manor's magic decide what to do with you. Owl us questions or to ask for a time to meet and we'll answer. But never come here uninvited. Assistant Director Potter, I guess we'll see you some other time."

Having achieved a minor reduction in numbers, Harry turned back towards the Bones women. "Might I suggest a floo call in the future?"

Amelia and Susan bid the others goodbye and left through the Blacks' fireplace.

Peter saw Tonks, the two Lord Blacks. and his great nephew were all that remained. "Are your mornings typically this fun?"

"More often than you'd think," Tonks answered for them. "So you knuckleheads going to kick me out too?"

Harry shrugged and turned towards Lord Potter. "You're the one who wanted to talk politics. Any objections?"

"Please," Peter said, waving his hand. "Nothing so formal, anyone you'd like to join us is welcome. I was merely very intrigued after your unique introductions to the Wizengamot yesterday."

"Well I hate to disappoint you PJ," Sirius grinned. "But we're really not very intriguing. Shall we adjourn to the muggle room?"

Peter didn't move as he turned to Harry and warily asked, "You have a room you keep your muggles in?"

"Doesn't everyone?" Harry chuckled. "But that's not the room he's talking about. We just picked up a new muggle home entertainment center and Sirius likes to waste away in front of the telly." Harry noticed Tonks had run quickly after Sirius heading towards the warded room. "Tonks too."

Peter and James Jr. were both impressed by the setup and amused at the way Tonks and Sirius had already turned everything on, hypnotized by the screen.

Kreacher brought them all beverages while Lord Potter inquired about Sirius and Harry's opinions on a variety of issues. Peter informed them his older brother Chuck had married Dorea Black while Sirius and Harry deftly avoided questions about exactly which branch of the family they came from or how the two of them were related. When the conversation turned towards old family history, it was clear Sirius and Harry weren't particularly proud of the Black legacy. Peter recounted some of the more shameful aspects of the Potter line while Sirius named every old Black he could think of that was worthy of their respect.

Harry saw Tonks and James Jr. were as clueless as he was and asked, "You're pretty quiet there, Jimmy. Alright?"

James Jr. nodded. "I don't know much of the history of the Potters. And my Dad's not all that big on tradition or old family politics either, so Uncle PJ's been trying to teach me all the things he doesn't think my Dad will."

"Traditions were made to be broken," Harry said. "Or was that records?"

"I think you used that same argument about hymens the other day," Tonks interjected.

"Yes, well," Harry considered. "I think I tried it with the spirit of weak-willed morons too."

"Can I ask you something kinda personal, Harry?" James Jr. cautiously inquired.

Harry glanced at Tonks to see if she'd been giving anything away and answered. "Ask anything you want. No guarantees on whether I'll answer though."

James Jr. nodded immediately and saw his great uncle and Sirius were deep in conversation. "I can't help but notice you've got a few scars on your body. And I was curious where you got them."

Harry had forgotten he was shirtless still and looked at the scars on his arms and shoulder. "Yeah, the disfiguring ones you want to heal, but if they just look cool and have a decent story behind them, I'll wear 'em proudly. You want to trade some scar stories?"

"I don't know how much I've got to trade. Wait!" James Jr. pulled up his pant leg. "I got this one from when I flew into a tree but that's about it. And... well... I pretty much just told you the story."

"I've got a few," Tonks grinned, tilting her head and showing one she kept hidden on the back of her neck. "But I've been meaning to ask about that shoulder one you got Harry."

Harry looked over at his rough right shoulder and grinned. "You picked a fun one to start. That one's got a happier memory than some. Let's see... this was over a year ago. There's this magical school, a lot like Hogwarts, and the seventh years had a ditch day where a couple dozen of the most troublesome miscreants were all involved in a scavenger hunt. One of the tasks was to locate... someone and get them to do something on the list. A younger brother of a good friend of mine led two of his classmates to my place figuring I'd be good for their hunt. Well, I made them work for it, teasing them with opportunities to win a drink, and when they failed, I'd down the shot of firewhiskey."

"Oh this bodes well," Tonks grinned.

"My tolerance for alcohol wavers every once in a while and before I realized it, I was quite drunk with three kids your age," Harry continued remembering needing a pensieve the next morning to get answers. "Anyways, Hogwarts was a well-known school to those kids and somehow I came up with one of my less than brilliant ideas. I suppose I should add that when I get bored and drunk, my judgment may stray into unhealthy territory. I think I was dared but I might have dared myself, either way the point is, I wanted to test the Hogwarts motto."

"*May stray into unhealthy territory?*" Peter questioned with a smile, as he and Sirius had stopped to listen to Harry's tale.

"Refresh my memory please," Tonks asked. "Just what is the Hogwarts motto?"

"*Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus,*" Harry answered just as assuredly as if Hermione was quizzing him.

"In English?"

"Never tickle a sleeping dragon." James Jr. was looking at Harry's shoulder reverently. "That's a dragon bite?"

"No, no, not a bite," Harry said running his fingers over the two valleys that had been gashes. "Just a little tail swipe."

"You took students with you to tickle a dragon?" Peter clarified warily.

Harry winced a little. "I was careful. I fitted them all with portkey trigger-buttons. If their thumb let up off the button, the portkey would've taken them away. And besides it was a mammoth old fat dragon anyway." Harry paused and saw that his precautions hadn't earned him any sympathy. "Or at least I'd thought it was."

"What was it?" James Jr. asked enthralled by the story.

"Well, I mean it looked like four rolls of belly fat underneath this snoozing overgrown lizard," Harry explained. "Until I actually flew up

to it and began to tickle it. My blurry vision got a lot less blurry and it turned out the four rolls of belly fat were actually four little two meter baby dragons. And one large, perfectly fit, very angry mother dragon nursing.

"I flew out of there, dodging her fireblasts until one of the little guys bit down and managed to get a firm hold of my cape."

"Hang on," Sirius interrupted. "Cape?"

Harry nodded. "Well I looked silly with only a codpiece and a helmet on. The cape made all the difference."

Sirius saw everyone else looked as lost as him. "Continue."

"Anyways, it was the little bugger pulling me down off my broom, and angry mama dragon's tail just glanced off my shoulder sending my flailing into the tree. Before I could hit it, I triggered my own portkey, which triggered all three of the boys' portkeys too."

Harry smiled rubbing his shoulder again. "That's how I got a cool scar and that's how those kids won their scavenger hunt."

"Oh yeah?" Tonks smirked, up for a challenge. She showed off her right shin. "That's from a goblin's scimitar."

"You don't want to play this game with me," Harry argued. "You can cheat and make up all the ones you want. My truth is stranger than your fiction." Harry tapped his forehead, subtly indicating his unbeatable trump card in any game of scar one-upmanship.

Tonks didn't think that one should count. "I wouldn't cheat," Tonks said hefting her elbow in the air. "Griffin paw raked me, right here. What do you got?"

Harry jumped up and bent over, revealing a butt cheek. "Muggle shot me three times after a little dark artifact hunting accidentally burned down a thousand acres of cartel owned land."

"Muggles," Tonks mocked.

Harry showed her the back of his right arm and pointed to a centimeter sized ring. "Basilisk fang."

"There's no way that tiny thing is from a basilisk fang," Tonks insisted. "Unless it was about a half meter long and still teething."

Harry rolled his arm over showing the much larger scarred ring. "That side was the exit wound, and it was about twenty meters and several centuries old."

Peter's eyes widened knowing how poisonous the serpents were in addition to their fatal stare. "You should be dead."

Tonks gulped, misinterpreting his meaning.

Harry poked Tonks with an invisible arm and answered, "A phoenix cried several tears, healing it while I was dizzy from the poison."

"That's bloody awesome!" James Jr. cheered.

"Yeah," Harry agreed before pouting. "But I've still never even seen a nundu."

"I saw one," Tonks triumphantly announced. She weakly added, "Course it was in a cage." She deflated further. "And dying."

Harry looked at the others. "Anyone want to go for a nundu hunt?"

Peter saw how excited his great nephew was and wisely decided, "I think perhaps we've taken up enough of your time, Sirius, Harry."

"That's probably a good idea," Sirius said shaking Peter's hand again. "I may need to put Harry down for his nap."

"Sorry, Lord Potter," Harry formally apologized. "I can only stomach so many reminders of our nation's corrupt wizarding history before I want to go... well, tickle a sleeping dragon. It gives me fresh memories of how exciting and fun the magical world really is."

"No apology necessary, Lord Black," Peter assured him. "I may have had a few flings with a vampire princess in my youth as well."

“Uncle PJ!” James Jr. exclaimed in shock. He started to smile, “Got any pictures?”

Peter steered his great nephew away. “Good day, Lords Black, Miss Tonks-Lupin. We should do this again some time.”

They had spent two long days scouting, planning, and settling on a course of action for their next job. The decision had been made and they’d already started the ball rolling with a hidden slow-acting ward-eater. Lord Simmons lived alone and was going to be out of the country for eight days. In Harry’s estimation, the primary outer wards would be weak enough by the day after tomorrow to crumble without incident.

With all of their preliminary work done, the two Lord Blacks were wandering Diagon Alley, when they encountered a small but familiar establishment entitled *Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes*.

Sirius smiled at the window display and walked in first. “How could you not want a custom charmed shirt to say *Fuck you all very much?* It’s my new catchphrase!”

“I’m sorry, Sirius,” Harry assured him while looking at the magic interwoven into the expensive t-shirt. He smiled to see ‘*and your mother twice*’ on the back of the shirt. “But you’re far too old for a catchphrase.”

“I am not,” Sirius pouted. “You’re just jealous my catchphrase is better than yours.”

“*I consider it my civic duty to piss you off* is much too long for a catchphrase, but let’s find out which one has been selling better.” Harry took Sirius’ shirt from him and they walked up to the counter where a Weasley twin was cashing out a customer and wearing a nametag that helpfully said, ‘Weasley.’

After the customer finished, Harry and Sirius stepped up. Harry greeted, “Weasley?”

The man looked up as his twin came out from the back room with a sandwich in his hand. Recognition flashed in his eyes as he retorted, "Lord Black?"

"Weasley," Sirius greeted the other twin.

"Lord Black!"

"Weasley."

"Lord Black?"

"As much fun as it might be to continue, Fred, George, this is Sirius, and I'm Harry."

"It is indeed very serious," one of the twins agreed.

The other continued, "And I can recommend a good barber if you like." He closed an eye to examine Harry's unruly black hair. "Maybe some landscapers too."

"We have a question for you, Fred," Harry said looking at the twin manning the register.

"How'd you know I'm Fred?" He said with a frown.

Harry grinned. "I didn't because you're not. You're George, and I know *that* because you would never give up the opportunity to switch places so quickly as to admit to being Fred."

George turned towards Fred who was still eating his sandwich. "He's a slippery one alright."

Fred shrugged and swallowed the bite in his mouth. "Well we are selling shirts off of their quotes."

"And that's what we wanted to ask you about," Sirius jumped in. "Just how much better is *Fuck you all very much* selling versus that other one that's not really a catchphrase?"

“They’re about even as most people buy both. Ten galleons for the pair, six galleons for just one,” George answered. “You Lords here to demand a piece of the action?”

Sirius and Harry exchanged a glance and both shook their heads.

“I was wondering,” Harry inquired. “Just what sort of magic is on them to justify the cost of six galleons at your limited time only sale price?”

“They’re expensive because we had to create our own spell and security on them,” Fred answered. “It’s based off of muggle charms, where muggles look at magic buildings and see ruins. The spell makes it so people who’d get really offended by the words see only what they’d expect to see.”

“Which is usually just a plain t-shirt,” George added.

Sirius let out a low whistle. “That’s a tasty piece of magic.”

“They’re not quite foolproof though,” George answered pointing towards the front of the store.

A small girl was tugging on her mother’s sleeve and asked, “Mummy? Why does that say...” The little girl pulled her mother closer and whispered in her ear.

“Well I never!” the mother huffed and grabbed her daughter leaving the store quickly.

Harry and Sirius turned back around to face the brightly smiling Weasley twins.

“You’re obviously doing something right,” Sirius grinned. “But with the ability to manufacture clothes like that in addition to all your other wheezes, I’d have thought you’d need a bigger store.”

Fred smiled sadly. “Unfortunately we don’t have the capital to expand and Gringotts’ unsecured loan rates hover right around...”

“Your firstborn and your soul,” George finished. “Why? Do the Lords Black have ten thousand galleons they want to loan us?”

Sirius and Harry looked at each other for a moment intermittently smiling and shrugging. Harry turned back, "Maybe."

Fred and George both stiffened and stood a little straighter. "Are you serious?"

Harry slapped a hand over Sirius' widely smiling mouth. "First thing is you never ask that question around this guy. And second..." Harry let go of Sirius' mouth and turned to him. "What's second?"

"Second," Sirius grinned. "I can assure you that we are at a minimum, half-serious."

Fred and George were smiling brightly at Sirius.

"Ah crap," Harry realized and grumbled. "I'm about to be outnumbered and he's got a new catchphrase."

"Give us a few days," George said. "We'll work up a proper business presentation and proposal for you."

"You don't have to do that," Harry said waving them off. "We wouldn't even appreciate a proper business presentation. Tell you what. Give him his t-shirt free, set me up with a few pairs of extendable ears, and we'll buy you guys drinks tonight. We can talk about it then."

"I'll warn you right now," Sirius jumped in. "I'm thinking more along the lines of an investment or partnership than a simple loan. We don't want to buy you out or force our opinions on you, but I think giving us a stake in helping *your* business to improve will benefit us both."

"The shirt's yours," George quickly agreed.

Fred added, "And I know where we can go and get the drinks for free."

The twins looked at each other and said in unison, "But what are extendable ears?"

Harry blinked having not even considered that they might not have been invented here. "Oops."

Sirius came to Harry's rescue and added, "We'll probably give you some invention ideas even if we don't reach an accord. Now where's this place with free drinks?"

Fred corrected, "They're not free for everybody, but if you're with us, you should be fine. We'll close up a little early and meet you at the Hog's Head in an hour?"

"It's in Hogsmeade," George clarified. "Near the edge of town."

"We know it. See you soon, gentlemen," Sirius agreed and steered Harry on out of the store.

The two men hadn't even gone thirty paces when they were interrupted by one of the slimiest sounding voices around.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't both the Lords Black," Lucius Malfoy drawled, while his wife just stood next to him with a stoic expression. "Two people claiming the same Lordship. That's a bastardization of magic and nobility not seen since the blood traitor to the Black name was... *purified* twenty-five years ago."

Sirius knew Lucius was just trying to get a rise out of them. "I'm sorry. Am I supposed to know you?"

"Hang on," Harry happily interrupted when Lucius was about to respond. "The over-compensating cane, the hair that has to look more feminine than his wife's, you know this guy. This is that registered sex offender the other Lords kept joking about, Shoeless Towel-boy or something like that."

Lucius was seething but kept up his mask of indifference. "You poor misguided plebeians. You don't have to hide behind such a faux rebellious attitude just to get your names in the paper. After all, the Blacks and Malfoys have been allies for centuries."

Harry got the feeling he detected amusement in Narcissa's eyes. "Allies? Don't you Malfoys consider the word *allies* a synonym for the people you haven't gotten around to stabbing in the back yet?"

Sirius jumped in and explained to Harry. "He's referring to the part of the Black legacy where you devote yourselves blindly to terrorist organizations. There's nothing like propagating intolerance and bigotry to bring glory and honor to a proud family."

Lucius narrowed his eyes but wasn't going to lose his cool. "If you have no interest in improving the state of affairs and restoring our nation to greatness, perhaps you should go back to whatever hole you two crawled out of," Lucius warned.

"Restoring our nation to greatness?" Sirius retorted. He turned to Harry and asked, "Does he actually mean ideals as dated as that hideous outfit he's wearing?"

"Be nice, Sirius," Harry sarcastically scolded. "You can see the wrinkles on his face, the grey coming in to his hair. At least he can still fit into an old costume like that."

Lucius' eyes flared at the mention of grey hair but held his tongue. "I see tradition and loyalty has truly become lost to the Black family."

"On the contrary, Lord Towel-boy," Sirius retorted happily. "The Blacks will protect their own. It saddens us to think of the horrors Narcissa Black has endured over the years, though it is a comfort to know that you can't teach ignorance."

"No matter how hard your daddy and his wand probably tried," Harry added with a grin while fighting the impulse to smack the smug look off Lucius' face.

Lucius just smiled dangerously. "I was asked some *very* interesting questions about you, Sirius Black," Lucius said with a knowing grin. "And I suspect you were asked similar questions about me."

"You suspect?" Harry interjected. "He suspects, Sirius. Do you suspect anything?"

"I suspect his crotch is so rotten that even the crabs committed suicide," Sirius answered.

Lucius shook his head. "Boys, boys. Tsk, tsk. Always so quick to hide behind sarcasm. Quite a bit like a Sirius Black I used to know. He died on Halloween begging for mercy from what I hear. It'd be a *crying* shame for history to repeat itself."

"Says the man who brought up that point once already," Sirius retorted.

"I noticed you sent a representative to the Wizengamot," Harry commented. "You should come yourself. I'd love to see if we couldn't try and resolve our differences with an audience."

Lucius sighed. "I suppose it was a vain hope that either of you could engage in any intelligent conversation." He grabbed Narcissa's hand. "Let us take our leave from the travesty your former family has become."

"We mean it, Narcissa," Sirius called out as they walked away. "We will protect a Black. It requires renouncing any other name or Master, and declaring loyalty to the family. Think about it the next time he curses you."

Harry sighed once the Malfoys were out of earshot. "God I hate that fucker."

Sirius shook his head. "You know growing up, she was only mean to me when she was forced to. Not exactly a bucket of compassion, but her heart wasn't in it. Not sure her heart has ever been in anything."

Harry smirked. "She's as bad as Molly Weasley at being a doting mother."

"I could see that." Sirius agreed and turned to Harry. He made sure he was looking him in the eye, pleading, "After this job, I want to rob that fucker blind."

Harry nodded and sighed. "Me too, but don't set your heart on it just yet. If it's anything like our old world, the wards are tighter than everything this side of Gringotts and Hogwarts."

"I figured," Sirius admitted. "Let's go get drunk now. Get a head start on those Weasley twins."

The pair apparated to Hogsmeade and walked right into the dingy pub, the Hog's Head. A quick glance showed a woman behind the bar and not the Headmaster's brother that Harry had been expecting. His attention was drawn to a smiling blonde woman waving him over to her table. Sirius walked up to the bar while Harry approached the attractive familiar face.

"I've been expecting you," Luna Lovegood greeted Harry.

Harry looked around briefly and saw Sirius was still trying to get the attention of the bartender. "Are you sure it's me you've been expecting?"

Luna shook her head. "No, but I think it is."

"Why were you expecting me?"

Luna tilted her head in the exact same way the Luna of Harry's old dimension did. "You know me, but I don't know you."

"Interesting," Harry commented, unsure how he felt about an alternate Luna but having never doubted the loyalty of the first one.

Luna tilted her back up and earnestly asked, "Perhaps we could discuss it over libations as we collectively contemplate the possibility of intercourse?"

Harry blinked. Then he took a moment to process her meaning and smiled at her. "Okay."

"Harry!" Sirius wheezed out. "Harry help! Man down!"

Harry whipped around and saw Sirius on the floor, with his hands over his crotch. He didn't see any threats but a few that looked like regulars around the bar were chuckling. He ran up to his godfather and asked, "What happened?"

Sirius took one of his hands off his private bits and pointed straight towards the bar and bartender.

Harry jerked up and immediately began to assess the threat. The bartender was a bit short, had a rag tied up covering her black cropped pixie-like hair. A decent chest accentuated by a halter-top and half-folded down apron showed a toned stomach. The most fetching aspect was the pair of thong straps riding up her bare hips. She had more piercings than just about any witch Harry had ever seen, but the twinkle in her eye was way too familiar.

“Holy crap!” Harry blurted out, leaning forward to look closer at her face. “Ginny?”

The bartender’s smirk turned into a frown and she slapped her hand down on the bar directly in front of Harry.

Harry wondered what the hell happened to Ginny Weasley and why she was slapping the bar when he felt a steel-toed boot fly up between his legs and slam into his soft tissue.

Harry crumpled to the floor, grabbing his livelihood, and assuming a nearly identical position as Sirius.

Sirius was now laughing in pain but making no move to get up off the floor yet. “That kick lifted you off the ground. That was great.”

Harry could only groan, as the bartender walked around the bar and right up to the two men on the floor.

They both rolled onto their backs to look up at her, catching a nice view of some skintight leather shorts. A small kitten tattoo was partially visible on an inside upper thigh that Harry was confident was completely bare on the original Ginny.

She was perfectly aware where both men were staring as she smirked down on them. “The name is Gin and you’d do well to remember that.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Harry woke up with the feeling it was going to be a morning like any other.

He cracked an eye open and saw Luna Lovegood sitting up, staring at him with wide unblinking eyes.

Harry lost the little faith he had in his initial feeling.

He then quickly thought back to when he first saw the Luna of this world. She'd waved him over to her table but he had been pulled away. He remembered Sirius called for help and then he remembered... pain.

Ginny Weasley.

No, not Ginny Weasley, Harry mentally corrected, *Gin* Weasley.

"Ginny is the name of a little girl who plays with dolls. A Ginny wants to be a princess. A Ginny wants to be saved by a knight in shining armor. A Ginny would get her pampered little ass kicked and thrown out of MY bar. There are very few people in this world I allow to call me that and neither of you are them. Can you remember that or do you need another reminder?"

Harry smiled in remembrance that about a half hour later Sirius had in fact received another reminder. Luna had joined them at the bar and they got to hear the story of how Gin beat Aberforth Dumbledore in a drinking contest and won herself a pub. And it had been Aberforth who had personally charmed the bar to make it easier for her to handle rowdy customers. Sirius made the mistake of asking for a demonstration and earned himself that second 'reminder.'

Harry recalled going to the mens' room and nearly making a mess as the pictures hanging above the urinals were apparently also charmed by Aberforth Dumbledore. Charmed to be action portraits of the faces made by the three most recent recipients of kicks from the charmed bar. So Harry had to try and pee straight while pictures of Sirius, Harry, and Sirius again all went pale, shivered, and had eyes that bulged out or rolled back up into their heads.

Just about everyone in the bar had been greeted and served by name. Harry had come to the conclusion that even if he'd wanted to try and play the role of the indignant noble Lord then he'd probably have a whole pub of people with something to say about that.

The most intriguing changes Harry noticed had been in Gin's attitude and character. He'd been extremely amused to see she was filled with strength, confidence, piss, and vinegar. Harry knew better than to mention it to the ghost haunting him, but he'd never been more attracted to any Weasley than when Gin looked at him indifferently. That was when he silently made a personal vow to never touch this Gin either. Primarily because it would make living with her ghost impossible.

He clearly recollected Fred and George coming by and agreeing to a partnership with them. The Black family would finance a significant expansion in exchange for a third ownership stake in the company. Requesting custom creations was planned but not until a little further in the future.

And then he remembered Luna saying something about the wuffwaffles in the air indicating it was the ideal time for enhancing the pleasure of intercourse. That was when Harry bid the three Weasleys and his godfather 'good night' and came back home with Luna.

This was where Harry's memories started to get really fuzzy. He remembered a crazed look in Luna's eye, small and furry purring, his own screams, and... something about friction inducing combustion.

"Harry?"

Harry was drawn out of his short jaunt down memory lane by the voice he'd been replaying in his head. His eyes snapped open and he saw Luna was still sitting there topless just staring at him.

"Do you remember me? I'm Luna," she indicated pointing towards herself. "Luna Lovegood."

Harry smiled at her peculiarity. "Yes, Luna. I definitely remember you."

Luna smiled brilliantly. "I don't have much time here, but I must say it is very good to see you."

"You too," Harry agreed happily humoring her.

"Oh! Oh!" Luna gasped in realization. "Did you find your godfather?"

Harry tensed immediately, knowing that information was supposed to stay private. "What do you mean?"

"Sirius? Your godfather?" Luna explained slowly. "You know, the reason you were working on the Exit?"

Harry's mind froze for a moment unsure what was going on. He squinted to look at her closer. "*Luna?*"

Luna frowned. "I thought you said you remembered me."

Harry's paranoia quickly downshifted into the 'What Would Mad-Eye Moody Do' gear. "Who did the commentary on my quidditch matches sixth year and who did I take to Slughorn's Christmas party that year?"

"Me and me," Luna answered before smiling back at him. "You don't have to prove it, Harry. If you say you remember me, I believe you."

"What... but..." Harry stopped, smiled, and lunged forward to catch her in a hug. "Luna! Why didn't you say anything before? Wait," Harry leaned back to get a better look at Luna's expressionless expression. "You said you didn't know me."

"When did I say that?" Luna frowned trying to think back.

"Last night," Harry reminded, "at the bar?"

"I didn't go to any bar last night," Luna answered in confusion. "I went to bed and read great-great-great-aunt Thethpa's diary. I've been spending my morning trying out a theory of hers she could never prove. I'm still a bit skeptical though so that may be coloring my perception."

Harry just looked at her trying to locate any identifying marks but got distracted by her bare breasts.

"You might be confusing me with the Luna native to this world," Luna explained before sticking a hand under the sheet testing her soreness. "Did you have sex with her last night? Because my vagina feels extraordinarily tender."

Harry nodded slowly before warily asking, "Luna, what have you done?"

Luna pulled her fingertips away from her nose when she realized she'd been caught smelling. "Since I last saw you? That's a pretty long list and if this is in fact a different dimension, I think you should forgive me for not having brought my photo album."

"I mean how did you get here," Harry clarified. "And why aren't you the Luna I met last night?"

"It's one of Thethpa's theories. Right now, I suppose, I am possessing this world's Luna," Luna answered.

Harry blinked. "You're possessing the Luna of this world? How?"

"As I understand it," Luna tapped her chin. "You know how you sometimes daydream? Or imagine how things could be different in your head?"

Harry nodded.

"Well when you do that, according to crazy aunt Thethpa, you're actually possessing yourself in another world. Her theory is that certain people can control it and stay in those worlds a bit longer than their subconscious minds intend to," Luna explained before pondering aloud. "I'm still not sure if I buy that. But I suppose if I don't then you're just a figment of my imagination. *And* I suppose I may have sacrificed another of the neighbor's cats unnecessarily."

Harry tried to picture what his life would be like if he were a figment of Luna's imagination. After several seconds where he was unable to come up with a difference, he figured he wasn't going to like the

answer. "Okay," Harry paused once more and when nothing came to mind, decided to address Luna's earlier question. "And yes, I found Sirius. He was trapped in between this world and our old one for almost ten years. But he's doing real well now."

"That's wonderful," Luna smiled. "I told Hermione I was sure you were with him, but I was just saying that to get her to stop crying. I'm glad you didn't make a liar out of me."

"Hey," Harry suddenly realized he could get some answers to questions about his former world. "How is she doing? How's everyone doing? Did I get a funeral or are people trying to get me back?"

Luna shook her head. "The Ministry said it was too dangerous an artifact to keep around and that you nearly destroyed the arch when you got sucked in. Hermione thinks the Minister just didn't want you coming back."

Harry was guessing Hermione was probably right. "It was crumbling as I tried to hold on so it might have imploded. But still, I don't think I'd want to come back anyway."

"Good new world?" Luna asked cheerfully.

Harry grinned and nodded back. "No one knows me, well, that's not quite right. No one knows the Boy-Who-Lived. And just the other day I joined the Wizengamot and got to stab a guy. It's a lot more fun to be on the stabber side than the stabbee."

"Really," Luna said filing that information away. "I'll have to try that sometime. It does give me an excuse to track down Cho..." she trailed off deep in thought.

"So come on, how's everyone holding up? Hermione? The Weasleys? Minerva? Remus and Tonks?"

Luna shrugged. "Hermione cried a lot, but I think she was happy for you. The Weasleys felt kinda bad both because you were gone, and also Ginny was really gone now. Ronald was angry though that may be how he grieves. But really? I thought your death was rather... anti-

climactic. No new Dark Lords suddenly appeared, no strange magical phenomena, not even an outbreak of green-eyed black-haired babies claiming themselves heirs to the Potter name. Well, yet anyway."

"Excellent," Harry agreed. "Do me a favor and let people know I'm happy and healthy."

"Okay," Luna answered.

"Hang on," Harry asked. "Can you teach them to possess themselves? They could drop in for a visit."

Luna stroked her chin in thought. "I doubt it. Great-great-great-aunt Thethpa could never do it. The only person I can think of that might be capable of managing the theoretical magic would be you. And you don't have a body in our world anymore. You're dead."

"Why just me and not the others?"

"Even if they were willing to pay the... erm, *costs* involved," Luna carefully worded. "We're still talking about magic across dimensions. And we know Ron, Hermione, and Neville didn't even hear any voices in the Exit. Besides, the more we talk, the more I'm convinced this is all my imagination."

Harry frowned, wanting to argue but trying to avoid any universe-shattering realizations. "So... umm... what else is new in my old world?"

Luna turned to make sure she had Harry's attention. "Listen Harry," she glanced at the clock. "I'm going to wake from this magical coma in about forty more minutes and I don't particularly want to spend the rest of my time with you trying to subtly convince me that you're real."

"I am real, you know."

"I know you think you are."

Harry pouted for a moment before conceding, "Fair enough." Harry sat up to face her. "What would you like to do for the next forty minutes in this world?"

Luna sighed shaking her head. "This is my imagination and I sought you out, Harry. What do you think people use their imagination for?"

"Oh?" Harry said before realizing, "*Ohhh*. Really? I thought that was just guys."

Luna swung her leg over straddling him and smiled dangerously. "You poor, naïve child."

Shortly thereafter, Harry regained some of his fuzzier memories. And the screams started up again.

Approximately thirty-nine minutes later, Harry and Luna collapsed against each other, entwined like a sweaty flesh pretzel.

"Hmm," Luna mused as her time was running out. "That was... exactly like I expected it to be."

Harry turned his head to look at her.

Luna shrugged. "I'm sorry Harry but Thethpa's theory is clearly just a fool's dream. And you are only a figment of my imagina-"

Harry was about to retort when Luna's head just fell forward and slapped against Harry's chest. It was approximately two seconds later that she began to snore, and Harry felt a drool puddle begin to form.

The Luna of his old world was gone. And the Luna of this world seemed quite tired.

Harry carefully extricated himself from underneath Luna and gave her a large pillow to snuggle. He put on some pajama pants and quietly left the room. He walked down the steps and was going to the kitchen when he heard voices coming from the den. He turned around and caught traces of a heated conversation. He spotted the floating spectral form of Ginny Weasley facing away and wondered why she hadn't come to say hello to Luna.

"It's not so much that I slept with him *because* he's Lord Black, as it is in *spite* of the fact that he's Lord Black."

Harry knew the voice was familiar but couldn't quite place it. He reached the den and stuck his head in to see who it was. He blinked. "Fuck."

"There's the lovebird," Ginny greeted with a wide smile.

"Aw fuck," Harry repeated glancing between the ghost and the witch. "Fuck."

"Who... him?" Gin the-very-much-not-a-ghost Weasley said, shaking her head. "That's Harry. He's *not* the Lord Black I slept with."

Harry heard the words and saw the ghost visibly pale. "Aw fuck."

"You *what?*" Ginny whispered dangerously, her incorporeal state shivering in air. "But... you... I... oh dear... my heart... Harry... I'm having a heart attack... Harry. Help me!"

"You're a ghost," Gin reminded the overdramatic apparition. "You don't even have a heart."

"Oooo," Ginny steamed, positioning herself behind Harry. "Don't hold me back, sweetie. Let me at her! Come on!"

Harry saw the ghost was pretending to reach forward while being supposedly restrained.

"You're a *ghost*," Gin repeated incredulously.

Ginny was seething. "I lied! That haircut looks horrible!" She snarled at what she felt to be an abomination to the Ginny Weasley name. "And you're fat."

Harry kept turning his head between the ghost over his shoulder and the proprietor of the Hog's Head on his left.

"My Harry's going to kick your ass," Ginny snapped pointing angrily at Gin. "And he's going to obliviate you. And he's going to give me your body. And together, we're gonna spit on your-"

“Ginny,” Harry interrupted knowing he’d let this go on long enough. “Get out of here.”

The ghostly Ginny turned towards Harry, looking shocked and heartbroken. “But...”

“Go!” Harry snapped.

There was a small poof and the ghostly form of Ginny popped into dust. Harry sighed and saw Gin Weasley resting comfortably on the couch. He winced. “There’s a very good explanation for what just happened.”

“I’m sure there is,” Gin retorted.

Harry closed his eyes. “Out of curiosity, just how much did she tell you?”

“Not too much,” Gin wryly commented. “But apparently we’re going to have black and white magical roses in the centerpieces at our wedding reception... as Mr. and Mrs. Potter.”

Harry flinched. “Fuck.” He sighed knowing what he distastefully had to do.

“Listen, I-” Gin stopped when she saw Harry draw his wand. “Whoa!” She snapped out her own wand and held it steady in front of her.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Harry said moving towards her. “But you’re better off not knowing some things.”

“Stop right there,” Gin ordered, quickly casting a shield around herself and turning her body sideways into an alert dueling position.

Harry caught her gaze and encountered immediate resistance to his gentle attempt at *Legilimency*. A little mental nudge and he discovered the start of her conversation with ghostly Ginny. Knowing now that he had all the mental distraction necessary, he quickly shattered her magical shield, twisted her wand straight from her grasp and used the remaining four magical arms to grab Gin’s wrists and ankles, holding her in place in the air.

“Bugger me,” Gin swore with wide eyes as she was pinned and held in the air. She hadn’t even seen a spell.

“This is for your own good, as much as mine,” Harry assured her, preparing to cast a memory charm.

“Wait! Wait!” Gin pleaded. “Hang on. Just hear me out.”

Harry allowed his wand arm to relax while he pulled her close to hover right in front of him.

“Merlin,” Gin breathed out as she was pulled through the air with just a thought. She looked at Harry and cautiously asked, “You’re actually hearing me out?”

Harry nodded. “Contrary to what you might think, I’m not an enemy. And I like you well enough, considering I just met you last night.”

“Yeah,” Gin answered, feeling especially vulnerable. “I got the impression you’re a regular chivalrous hero, though I think she might have been exaggerating a bit.”

Harry figured that was an understatement but added, “You know the more we talk, the more I’m going to have to obliviate from you.”

“Don’t. That’s what I’m saying. Don’t obliviate me. I was thinking I could give you a conditional oath. Keep me magically unable to spill your secrets, rather than risk a charm I’d probably notice and eventually break.”

Harry considered it for a moment, just looking at Gin. “I think perhaps you underestimate my skills at memory charms, but what sort of conditions are you looking for in an oath?”

“Nothing huge, just something like as long as you’re not committing any heinous crimes or making me an accomplice to something, as well as maintaining a good business relationship with my brothers, I won’t reveal your secrets.”

Harry set her down and released her but kept her wand still out of reach. “I’m not sure if you’ve heard any of my opinions on the current

state of affairs in the Ministry, but some things others might officially call *heinous* crimes, I may be a big proponent of.”

“So what conditions are you looking for?” Gin said more than willing to negotiate.

Harry figured she just wanted assurance she wouldn’t be in danger. “As long as I don’t curse you, you can’t talk about me?”

Gin shook her head. “I’m not that naïve. I’ve heard about your skill, or lack there of, with a sword so we’re not limiting it to cursing. And being unable to talk about you at all would be too obvious. What if as long as you never mean harm to me, my family...” She paused for a moment before adding, “Or innocents in general then I can’t tell anything about you, that is otherwise unknown?”

“Otherwise unknown is too vague. Change it to anything I don’t allow you to and we’ll even remove temptation from you,” Harry said knowing conditional oaths could be unbreakable unlike those sworn on life or magic. Those could easily be broken at the cost of the oath-bound’s life or magic.

Harry smiled slightly when he saw Gin reluctantly nod. He floated her wand right in front of her.

Gin took her wand and for a moment considered making a break for it before catching Harry’s amused glance once more. She quickly swore her conditional oath to be unable to share anything about Harry that he didn’t allow her to.

Harry relaxed considerably once he saw the tendril of magic form into a bond. It shrank smaller than his eye could see, but he could still feel its presence.

Gin put her wand away and sat back down. “You know my oath didn’t say anything about Sirius...”

Harry knew she was demonstrating her trustworthiness by voluntarily offering that information but he still remarked back, “You know I can still obliviate you and not mean you any harm.”

“Touché,” Gin conceded before falling into an awkward silence. “So... are we cool now? Or...”

“We’re good.”

“Lovely.” Gin boldly demanded, “So what the hell was that?”

“What was what?”

“Taking my wand and holding me up in the air like that. It felt like hands were actually around my wrists.”

“That was just magic,” Harry answered in an attempt to avoid the question. “You want some breakfast?”

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

Harry smiled and jerked his head towards the kitchen. “Come on. Just because you’re keeping my secrets doesn’t mean I’ve got to tell you all of them.”

Gin had tended bar long enough to know she was more likely to get answers if she didn’t press for them. She nodded in understanding and walked with Harry down towards the kitchen.

“So what are you doing up so early?” Harry asked as he began to make enough breakfast for himself, Gin, and Luna. “And in that room too?”

Gin shrugged. “Running the bar means I’m nocturnal. We’re still a good hour from my usual bedtime. And I was in that room looking for something to read before a certain ghost tried to possess my body and I quote, merge our pure untainted souls.”

Harry winced and chose to skip over the metaphorical elephant in the room. “I doubt there was much worth reading in there. Some of those old books are cursed pretty nasty.”

“I avoided the shelf with the tray to catch dripping blood.”

“That’s a good shelf to avoid.”

The pair fell into an easy camaraderie and Harry saw glimpses of the friend he had in Ginny prior to her death. He figured tending bar made her a better than average conversationalist and was beginning to like the idea that he could spill any secrets to a welcoming ear and know magically, they were protected.

Of course, he still planned to kick Sirius' ass for managing to find someone even worse to bring home than the Director of Magical Law Enforcement.

"Oww!" Sirius yelled jumping up. He picked up the pine cone that had made its way onto his recliner in the brief seconds he'd been out of it. "Dammit Harry! I said I was sorry."

Harry just quietly hummed, while looking through the omnioculars at the solid walls surrounding the Malfoy land.

"You keep this up much longer and I'd swear you're jealous," Sirius added with a smirk.

A pine cone came mysteriously flying off the ground and beamed Sirius in the back of the head. "Oww!"

"Fine," Sirius said rubbing his head. "Not jealous, just PMSing."

Harry pulled the omnioculars away from his eyes and looked over at Sirius.

"I've been good," Sirius claimed. "We cleaned out Simmons place, got back all our ward eaters, made over twenty thousand galleons, and haven't spent a knut."

"You left that 'After Dark Mark' of the Death Eater Bandits again."

"It's our signature," Sirius argued. "And besides, if they hadn't printed the picture in the paper, you'd never have known so that doesn't count."

Harry didn't really care but felt he had to needle his godfather about something. He handed Sirius the omnioculars. "It doesn't look too inviting."

Sirius took the omnioculars and gazed through them. "You weren't kidding about locating the right frequency. I count at least a dozen different ward sets all within separate parts of the larger ones extending past the wall."

Harry answered. "Turn the magic knob to max and the overlay completely off."

Sirius pulled the omnioculars away and set the two dials as Harry suggested. He looked through them at the Manor again. "What am I looking for?"

"Notice the murky green covering all of the basement and dungeons?"

"Mmm-hmm," Sirius affirmatively replied.

"That's similar to the color of magic the Dark Mark flashes when he issues a summons."

Sirius looked over at Harry. "What's that mean?"

Harry shrugged. "Could mean anything, but it's not a color I've ever seen in wards before. And we're way past my current understanding."

"Worst case scenario, what do you think it is?"

"It detects for the Dark Mark, it alerts everyone with a Dark Mark, or at least, Voldemort, it allows people in but not out, it neutralizes our magic, it kills us instantly. Take your pick."

"So what then?" Sirius asked while looking through the omnioculars again. "We loot everywhere else but those parts?"

"There's also a dark red ward over the entire guest house and several other areas," Harry added. "Another color that's new to me."

“So we avoid those too.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know if you can tell, but there’s a large compartment under the drawing room floor. That’s one of the places with the really good stuff. I think it might be a blood-warded safe.”

“I know you’re not saying we should do nothing to that pompous twit.”

“I want to steal from him as much as you do,” Harry explained. “But I think we’d be better off doing this job later, once we have a bit more experience and hopefully knowledge on our side.”

Sirius frowned not wanting to say anything he might regret.

“You may notice the three main bubble wards are all solid and round: no gaps, no corners, no weak spots, and all over a meter apart.”

Sirius nodded after resetting the dials and viewing with the mansion once more. “Didn’t those new charmed thingies you bought allow us to extend beyond the limit of a meter?”

“Yep,” Harry agreed. “But that’s not the point. The distance separating them is a clear indication that they’re up to date on the tricks ward-breakers use.”

“Oh.”

“I mean it, Padfoot. I want to rob Malfoy. And I want to trash his place. But we should stick with what works and learn more as we go.”

Sirius sighed and tilted his chair back. “We still gotta stay here and do the homework though, don’t we?”

“You know the answer to that,” Harry said, flipping open his trunk. He reached down into it and grabbed a pair of chilled butterbeers. He handed one to Sirius and popped the top of the other.

Harry took a slow sip, while looking toward the Malfoy grounds. “Do you want to talk ideas on cracking this place? Or something other than work?”

“Other than work,” Sirius answered. “My brain’s going to be refusing to brainstorm for a bit. Tell me something I don’t know.”

“You don’t know,” Harry said. “So many options...”

“You’re hilarious.”

“I got one for you. Did you know we’re just figments of Luna’s imagination?”

Sirius glanced at Harry and saw he was smiling. “I must admit, I did not know that.”

“Not this world’s Luna, but the Luna of our original dimension,” Harry clarified. “She told me herself last week.”

“Hang on,” Sirius interjected.

“Yup,” Harry agreed.

“Luna from our old world talked to you last week? Wait, the one who spent the night?”

“Actually it was just for an hour in the morning that she possessed the Luna of this world and took advantage of me. But before our acts of depravity she caught me up on our old world a bit.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope,” Harry said sipping his butterbeer. “She told me they destroyed the Veil to make sure I couldn’t come back, and that everyone seemed to be doing okay. She violated me in a wonderful way and then informed me that I, and by extension this entire dimension, was figment of her imagination.”

“And you really think that was her?”

Harry nodded. “Oh yeah. No question in my mind.”

Sirius gave an approving nod. “I bet she’s a blast at parties.”

“For freaking others out without even trying, she’s in a class of her own. Now it’s your turn,” Harry said. “Tell me something I don’t know about you.”

Sirius took a moment, trying to think of something. “Cankles scare me.”

“What?” Harry asked unsure he heard that right.

“Cankles,” Sirius repeated. “You know those scary girls whose ankles are so thick they blend right into their calves? All the Holyhead Harpies have some scary cankles. Actually most female Quidditch players have cankles.”

“And they scare you?”

Sirius grimaced. “Well, they’re a hideous disfiguration, and usually indicative of the sort of girl who could kick a bloke’s arse. Gin’s aren’t quite cankles, but they were close enough to remind me of my fear.”

“You’re a picky pervert,” Harry decided taking another sip of his butterbeer.

“I got one for you,” Sirius said after his mind had strayed towards ways to circumvent the Malfoy wards. “Why haven’t you become an animagus? You said you’d tried.”

“That’s a good point,” Harry realized. “Maybe I should try again.”

“How exactly have you tried and failed?”

Harry shrugged. “I’ve read a couple of the books. I’ve done the practice exercises. I’ve searched inside for my spirit animal.”

“Did you try the potion?”

“Three times.”

“Black or white mist?”

“Neither,” Harry said shaking his head. “Grey mist.”

“Erm... my memory is a bit rusty. I thought black mist is for those without the ability.”

“Yup.”

“And white mist is when your form’s undecided?”

“Or when you’re too young to accept your animal side, if you favor MacArthur’s interpretation.”

Sirius frowned and looked at Harry. “So what does grey mist indicate?”

“Grey indicates I’m yet another exception to the rule,” Harry retorted. “I’ve talked it over with Minerva several times, and she had a theory.”

“Killing Curse?”

Harry was slightly impressed. “Wow Padfoot. It’s good to see you thinking like McGonagall. And yeah, considering my circumstances, she thinks the Avada may have killed my spirit animal.”

“I don’t think like McGonagall,” Sirius pouted. “So no animagus for you?”

Harry shook his head. “Not yet, but I’m going to try again. Because you know how some people can’t tame their animals but can be put into enchanted sleeps to try and stay there long enough to mess with them? She dropped me into one for an hour and I was bodiless in the grey mist.”

“And you saw something coming through the mist?”

“Sort of,” Harry admitted. “I saw what looked like... well, someone. I thought it was me. But the form never fully solidified. I think I might have just left my body and turned around to look at it through the mist.”

Sirius looked up, deep in thought. “Maybe you’re not human. You could be a flobberworm and your humanimagus form is Harry Potter.”

“Humanimagus form?” Harry tried out the word doubtfully.

“You’re an octopus!” Sirius realized. “That’s why you have the arms!”

“I’m not an octopus,” Harry assured him. “I can make dozens of arms, not just eight. And I’m kinda doubting that I’ve spent my entire life in my humamamagus form or whatever. Though I should thank you for the mental image of my mum giving birth to an octopus. Besides, after those mixed results, Minerva put me in enchanted sleeps a half dozen more times. All I’ve seen is grey, sometimes it’s kinda silvery but I’ve not seen any form since the first.”

“Could you be a demiguise?”

Harry looked over at Sirius in surprise. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“I mean you do kinda look ape-like and you could’ve been invisible all the other times.”

Harry harrumphed. “I’ll let that one slide because you actually had a decent idea.”

“I have some indecent ideas too,” Sirius offered.

Harry ignored him. “I think I’m overdue to try an animagus potion again, this time seeking out a demiguise.”

“And if that doesn’t work,” Sirius said. “I could put you in an enchanted sleep.”

“Yeah,” Harry skeptically replied. “Or maybe Moony could put me in an enchanted sleep.”

“A demiguise would be a great form for a thief,” Sirius said. “Could turn yourself invisible at will.”

Harry smiled hopefully. “Now that you mention it, I am craving a banana.”

“You know a banana-”

“Keep your indecent ideas to yourself, Padfoot,” Harry interrupted.

Sirius opened and then closed his mouth. After a couple seconds of silence he added, "I think that's all of them."

The two continued chatting amicably for two hours through the twilight and as the sun set. Sirius was trying to make his impatience as clear as possible without giving in and actually asking if they could call it a day.

Harry sat the omnioculars back down. "You about ready to get out of here?"

"Oh thank Merlin," Sirius readily agreed jumping to his feet.

"We can go," Harry smirked. "Just as soon as you tell me how to get into Malfoy Manor, disregarding the wards we can't identify."

"Dammit Harry," Sirius whined trying to come up with something. "I don't have any idea short of simply stretching a hole in every layer."

Harry sighed. "And from the looks of just the outer ones that'd take about a month assuming it didn't get noticed within an hour."

"Which knowing the twit, it would," Sirius insisted. "Honestly, I think our only hope is going to be getting Lucius to add us to his wards."

"I'm not sure how open to that idea he'd be."

"We'd have to ask him real nice," Sirius argued. "And it would take away some of the subtlety and elegance associated with the Death Eater Bandits."

"Feels like cheating too," Harry said. "But for Lucius, I expect I could overlook that."

Sirius nodded before turning on his puppy dog eyes. "Can we go now? Please?"

"Yeah," Harry agreed tossing everything they'd brought with them back into his trunk. He shrunk his recliner and Sirius' too dropping them in. "We've got enough info on these wards to try and figure

something out. But tomorrow we should begin the preliminary work on Burke and Darcy.”

“Tomorrow,” Sirius whined, drawing out the word. “Haven’t we earned a day off?”

“I won’t make you work if you don’t want to,” Harry said making sure everything was packed up, before beginning to dismantle the Fidelius. “But I’ll probably be doing some shadowing and intel gathering like a good, subtle, and elegant Death Eater bandit.”

“I know you want me to feel guilty, but I don’t,” Sirius stated hoping it’d keep Harry from working tomorrow.

Harry nodded. “Charm is coming down. Apparate to Diagon Alley first in case someone tries to trace us.” The anchor stones of Fidelius charm all crumbled inwards and the hidden square of space flashed.

Two soft pops and there was no sign of their former presence.

They walked to the entrance of the Leaky Cauldron and apparated back to Grimmauld Place.

Right when they arrived next to the bookcase blocking Mrs. Black’s portrait in the foyer, Harry silently held up a hand to stop Sirius.

“What is it?” Sirius whispered drawing his old driftwood wand.

“Someone’s here,” Harry said testing the wards over their home. “And it’s not Tonks or Moony.” He pointed Sirius towards the living room while Harry quietly went to check the kitchen.

Sirius stuck his head into the living room and couldn’t believe his eyes. She was looking straight at him, so he attracted Harry’s attention by loudly spitting out the name, “Bellatrix.”

Harry was by Sirius’ side immediately and barely recognized the far more attractive Death Eater. Harry doubted she’d spent any significant time in Azkaban. “She’s alone,” Harry assured Sirius while loosely aiming his own holly wand.

“Lord Bla-” she began right as the first spell was fired her way. A smooth practiced motion and a pink humming shield snapped into place around her. It easily deflected the yellow jet of light and ricocheted into a wall sconce, melting it immediately.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve,” Harry warned her sending two light blue spells towards her left and right sides.

Bellatrix twisted sideways avoiding them both while swatting away the next spell Sirius cast.

Harry sent a large area blast at her, and she was forced to take cover behind a couch.

Sirius and Harry kept up a flurry of spells as they began to circle and close in from separate sides of the room.

It was a testament to her skill that she’d only been grazed by a couple of cutting curses.

Sirius faked a quick lunge towards her, after Harry’s signal. Utilizing the distraction, Harry was now close enough that one of his magical arms snuck past her defenses and quickly twisted her wrist and wand behind her own back.

“Ahhh,” Bellatrix shrieked as her body arched away from Harry, leaving her wide open and vulnerable.

Sirius had already begun casting the spell he’d dreamed of hitting her with, before Harry had effectively rendered her temporarily harmless and twisted her to expose an unprotected front.

Bellatrix’s face locked in surprise when the crimson jet of light collided with her midsection and washed over her. Her legs went limp and her head made a loud crack as it bounced off the hardwood floor.

Harry looked at Bellatrix’s prone form on the ground and his godfather’s triumphant expression. “Was that spell what I think it was?”

"If you think it was the blood freezing curse," Sirius relished in answering, "then yeah. It was."

Harry had just started to relax when he saw Bellatrix's body convulse and flip over onto her back. He sent a stunner at her for good measure, but she managed to get a weak shield up.

"Lo- Lord Blacks," she slowly stuttered out the words as her body began to shut down and her arms began to shiver. "I'm- I'm- I'm here to pledge loyalty... to the family."

Sirius' look of triumph disappeared as he stood up a little straighter. "Did she just-"

"Yup," Harry said, rubbing his temples. He'd been so surprised she wasn't taunting them or using her bloody annoying baby voice, that he completely overlooked the fact that Bellatrix hadn't cast a single spell at them.

Sirius looked like he'd just swallowed a doxy. "Aww... bugger."

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I don't suppose you're gonna try and convince me we should just let her die?" Sirius half-heartedly asked.

Harry let out a loud sigh while looking down on the shuddering form of Bellatrix. He lifted her sleeve and found what he already knew to be there, the Dark Mark. "No. I'm not."

"Stupid bloody Gryffindors," Sirius said, referring to himself and Harry.

"As ridiculous as the privileges provided to a noble Lord are," Harry reluctantly explained while Bellatrix's shivering slowed down. "I can't help but take the 'responsibility to the family' aspect of it to heart."

"Bugger."

"Blame the Dursleys," Harry said looking up with a weak smile. "I do."

Sirius was curiously watching her shudders finally reach an end as she lapsed into unconsciousness. "I don't suppose you happen to know the counter to the blood freezing curse?"

Harry whipped his head towards Sirius. "Excuse me?"

Sirius frowned. "Yeah... didn't think so." He shrugged helplessly.

"Fuck," Harry said, suddenly grasping the full disaster of their situation. He quickly tried to think of anyone they could call in the next minute who would be able to counter that curse. The only people he could think of that might know the counter and would trust him enough weren't from this dimension.

"I do know the counter has to come from the same wand, so we'd need someone compatible," Sirius added seeing the wheels in Harry's head had begun turning. "And I think it's a different blood based curse rather than just a spell reversal."

"Dammit," Harry decided. "We're taking her to St. Mungo's."

Sirius had surmised as much. "You know they're gonna notice-"

"Yeah, I know," Harry said as he bent down to scoop up her body and felt the absence of heat. "Ah hell, she feels like a reptile." Harry grabbed a handful of floo powder and tossed it into the fireplace. "St. Mungo's!" He called out as he and Bellatrix were whisked away.

Sirius quickly followed after.

Harry emerged in the front lobby of the hospital for magical maladies and injuries. He was carrying Bellatrix's limp body, while making sure her sleeves stayed down. Harry scurried up to the front desk asking, "Emergency?"

The lady just looked up at him and pointed towards the right corridor.

Harry nodded and began to jog that way spotting a generic mediwitches' desk. "I need a..." Harry trailed off and had stopped his running as he recognized one of the last people he was prepared to see.

Lily Potter had been visiting an old friend and was headed towards the public fireplaces. She moved out of the way when she saw a young man barreling toward her carrying a woman in his arms. As he approached, she felt something inside of her calling out to him. She was inexplicably drawn to this man. She just stared at him with her wide identical green eyes as he slowed down to walk past in a moment that felt frozen in time. Her mind was belatedly processing the fact that this was one of the new Lord Blacks her son had been so impressed by.

There was an ache inside Harry that he'd not felt in years and didn't expect to ever feel again. If he had been more alert to his surroundings he would have registered her presence much sooner. But it was magic that informed him this was Lily Potter before his eyes had ever made that connection.

Sirius caught up with Harry and began to push him forward. "Kind of in a hurry, here, Harry."

"Right," Harry said as he snapped out of his momentary daze, unwilling to contemplate the Lily Potter of this world right now.

Sirius flashed Lily a smile and nod as he pushed Harry towards the emergency rooms. It was only after they were gone that Lily realized he had been carrying Bellatrix Black, a woman widely assumed to be a Death Eater.

"Healer Armstrong!" Sirius called out spotting a familiar face while Harry dashed into the first empty room he found. "We got an emergency here."

The man in question recognized Sirius Black and allowed him to direct him towards the room. "What's the problem?"

"She was hit by a blood freezing curse a couple minutes ago," Harry answered, glad to see Sirius closing the door behind him.

Healer Armstrong put his hands around her neck to estimate her temperature and check how strong her pulse was. "Did you cast any warming charms on her?"

"No sir," Sirius quickly answered.

"Good," the healer replied hurrying over towards a cabinet of supplies. He grabbed several vials of potions and hurried back towards the patient. "This is going to get bloody, so wait outside if that makes you queasy."

Harry and Sirius both shook their heads.

Healer Armstrong quickly grabbed a blade and sliced open arteries on both of Bellatrix's wrists. He directed a pair of pans to the floor that were catching the thick dark blood oozing out while he forced potions down her throat.

Harry glanced at Sirius inquisitively.

Sirius caught the unasked question and answered. "Healer Armstrong was the first healer I woke up to a few months back."

The healer had repositioned both of Bellatrix's hands over a single tray with a drain attached to her abdomen. The blood was being

funneled back into her body, leaving a nasty black sludge residue in the pan filter.

Healer Armstrong let out the breath he'd been holding as the tension and pressure of the situation had passed. He picked up a pink magically heated blanket and slid it behind Bellatrix's back, wrapping around her neck. "Okay," Armstrong said. "You guys got her here just in time. I expect after several days of feeling weak she should make a full recovery."

Harry and Sirius didn't exactly jump for joy, but nodded their heads in appreciation.

"Now before I call the aurors because of a certain tattoo on her arm," Healer Armstrong forcefully asked, "Is there anything else I need to know?"

"We're not sure," Sirius answered, hoping Harry knew better than to attempt a memory charm. "But we'd appreciate it if you didn't call them."

The healer didn't show any emotion as he asked, "Why not?"

Harry answered, "Because she's a Black who got hit by a blood freezing curse. With her last words before passing out she asked the Lords Black for protection. If she knew to come to us, then she knows that it means abandoning the Death Eaters."

"She's leaving the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters?" Armstrong clarified.

"I'd imagine the loyal ones don't get hit with that curse very often," Harry deftly replied.

Armstrong turned to Sirius. "So why aren't you sure what else I need to know?"

Sirius shrugged. "'Lord Blacks, I'm here to pledge loyalty to the family.' That's everything she managed to get out when we met her for the first time a few minutes ago."

Armstrong sighed. "I still have to report this." He held up a hand to stop their objections. "But I think I could hold off on informing the authorities until after she's been discharged into your care. I want her to stay overnight for observation, but in the morning I expect she'll be able to leave."

"Thank you," Sirius said with Harry nodding his assent.

"I've got restraints activated on the bed," Armstrong explained. "She could wake up within the hour or perhaps not until morning. In the meantime though I want at least one of you with her at all times."

"We're not going anywhere," Harry assured him. "We need to get some answers from her ourselves."

Healer Armstrong nodded in understanding and in a more friendly cordial tone asked, "How've you been, Sirius?"

"Great," Sirius answered. "Better than I've felt in years."

Healer Armstrong smiled a little for the first time. "I'll be back in a couple hours to take her off the filter." He shut the private room's door closed behind him leaving Harry and Sirius alone with the pale but temporarily harmless Bellatrix Black.

"Fucking Lestrage," Harry grumbled.

"Not Lestrage," Sirius corrected. "She's never been married here."

"Really?" Harry asked in surprise.

Sirius nodded.

"For some reason I thought everything before Halloween 1981 in this world was going to be the same."

Sirius shook his head. "Considering how strong Voldemort was in our world at that time, this place would have been fucked if that were true. No, it's close to the same but there's a few differences. Of course you were barely a tickle in Prongs' leg around then, so you might not recognize some of the differences."

Harry nodded in agreement. "It's somewhat comforting to know she didn't torture Neville's parents into insanity."

"That's not to say she hasn't done that to others but Moony doesn't think she's ever been arrested," Sirius said. "Frankly, the only thing they may even have on her would be being a Death Eater."

"Is that a crime?"

"Probably," Sirius said as he flicked her toe really hard. "God I hate this bitch."

"I'm with you."

Sirius looked at her closer and saw small flinches of pain and discomfort on her face. "She looks damn good though."

"Sirius," Harry winced. "She's your cousin."

"So?" Sirius shrugged. "It's not like I'm planning to make some three-headed cyclops pureblood heir. She's a cruel bitch and she's hot. Those two characteristics go together an awful lot."

"And what would the two *Aunt-Mums* have to say about this?"

Sirius shook his head. "You and your silly muggle-raised ideals."

"My only cousin was Dudley."

Sirius banished the mental image and spoke softly, "I don't think I want to forgive her." He took a deep breath. "Even though this one hasn't ever done anything to me. And she's hot."

"Oh for Merlin's sake," Harry groaned.

"I'm sorry," Sirius said. "It's just so much easier to hate ugly chicks. I'm... confused."

"About what?" Harry yelled. "Whether or not she's going to kill you in this world too?"

"Please Harry," Sirius said with a roll of his eyes. "You've got that honor reserved."

"Oh yes," Harry snapped. "Pick on the orphan boy with guilt issues."

"You're not that upset," Sirius lazily waved Harry off. "But speaking of... it sure looked like Lily recognized you back there. That's a pretty damn impressive mother's intuition."

Harry sighed trying not to think about it. "That wasn't mother's intuition."

"Of course not," Sirius agreed. "I'm sure Lily always greets new people carrying Death Eaters by staring with her mouth open."

"Dammit," Harry swore. "You know she might actually guess pretty close for all the wrong reasons."

"The wrong reasons?"

"Never mind," Harry said waving him off. "Anyways... no one will ever believe the truth, as long as we keep denying it."

Sirius wondered briefly what Harry meant but was interrupted by a moan from the bed.

Harry and Sirius were at her side immediately. Sirius had drawn his wand, while Harry revealed Bellatrix's. "Don't move," Harry instructed. "The curse is still being flushed from your blood."

Bellatrix heard the calm voice that had sounded so angry before. She blinked her eyes open and looked to her left and right. "Is this St. Mungo's?"

"Yes," Harry answered without explanation. "Are you prepared to disavow allegiance to any other Lord and swear your loyalty to the family?"

Bellatrix leaned forward and got a little dizzy from the head movement. "My sister seemed to think you might be able to protect me."

“Protect you from what?” Sirius asked, speaking up for the first time.

“The Dark Lord, the Death Eaters,” she weakly answered, “the Ministry.”

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Harry said.

“Nor you, mine,” Bellatrix snapped.

Harry and Sirius glanced at each other warily.

“Yes,” Bellatrix said breaking the uncomfortable silence. “I am *prepared* to, but I was hoping to meet you before deciding whether I should or not.”

“We can’t promise or guarantee your safety,” Harry explained. “But for as long as you remain a loyal member of the Black family, I will do everything in my power to protect you.”

Bellatrix turned to look Harry in the eye. “You will stand against him?”

The *him* in question was clear as day. Harry held eye contact with her and answered, “When he stands against a Black, yes.”

Bellatrix saw a determination in Harry that reminded her of the Dark Lord and turned to look at Sirius. From him she felt a warmth that reminded her of the Dark Lord. She let out a sigh. “I’ve no doubt a healer has seen the mark I carry. What happens when the aurors come?”

Harry lifted his hand displaying her wand. “I know the cunning of Tom Riddle and sending you to gather information on us is by no means a stretch for him. I think it’s time you rejoin the family before we humor any more of your questions.”

“I’ve seen your respect for wizarding tradition,” Bellatrix answered knowing she couldn’t reach for her wand if she wanted to. “So this is my choice? Joining a couple of muggle-lovers who are all set to hand me over to my reserved seat in Azkaban or going back to the situation that you know I want to leave?”

"You're the one looking to upgrade Lords," Harry countered. "It's not like our life is going to be any simpler with you under our protection."

Bellatrix still hesitated.

Sirius looked at Harry and said, "She had her chance. Let's go."

"Wait!" Bellatrix called out. "I'll swear."

Harry nodded at Sirius and slipped her wand into her right hand. Her wrists were still draining chunky blood at a rate equal to the blood flowing back into her body.

Bellatrix took a breath and said, "I hereby pledge my life, my loyalty, and my magic to the House of Black. In doing so, I disavow and sever any previous allegiances others may claim to my life, my loyalty, or my magic. So mote it be."

Harry and Sirius both felt the invasive pulse in their Black family rings and replied in unison. "So mote it be."

"So mote it be?" Harry repeated in a higher voice after the magic in the air finished. "People don't talk like that."

Sirius snickered.

"Stupid old magic using archaic language," Harry grumbled.

Bellatrix collapsed back and Sirius took the wand from her before it fell into the tray of blood. "What have I done?" she wondered for the first of many times.

Sirius grinned deviously. "That's exactly what we want to know, Bella. What *have* you done?"

Bellatrix hissed and tensed at the sting in her arm. "He's calling me. You gotta get me out of here."

"No," Harry calmly answered. "You're not answering this one. Tonight you're staying here, healing, and then tomorrow morning we're

checking you out. Your healer has agreed to put off contacting the aurors until we're gone. After that we can hide you or move you."

She was gritting her teeth as she added, "Maybe we should have them amputate the damn thing while we're here."

"Wouldn't help any," Harry said. "The mark is based off a bastardized serpent tattoo, but one of his modifications was including soul magic. It's visible on the skin, but attached to the soul. Lose the arm and you'll still feel the magic."

"You sure, Harry?" Sirius clarified with a knowing look. He was reminded that Harry had been incorrectly assuming everything before their deaths here was the same. "Why not take a look?"

Harry pulled up her sleeve to look at the Dark Mark and was shocked by what he saw. At first glance it looked exactly the same. Only this one was not burning red, but was in fact animated with the tattoo snake weaving in and out of the tattoo skull. Harry leaned down as he heard soft hissing coming from the serpent.

"The bitch won't like it," the snake rhythmically hissed. *"Master's calling, Master's calling. The bitch won't like it."* It paused again, before repeating its short song. *"Master's calling, Master's calling."*

Harry blinked having recognized the tune. "This little bugger is singing."

"What?" Sirius asked.

"What am I doing?" the snake tattoo stopped in surprise to ask.

"It stopped," Bellatrix announced happily as her face softened.

"Whoops," the snake said as it began moving wildly again.

Bellatrix winced. "Spoke too soon."

"Hey," Harry hissed in parseltongue at the Dark Mark. *"Do me a favor and stop that for a second."*

Bellatrix flinched at the sound, while Sirius looked happily disturbed by it. The snake tattoo froze in surprise, but it was the voice from the hospital room door saying, "Wow," that startled Harry.

"Don't mind me," Healer Armstrong said while closing the door behind him. "I just need to check on my patient."

Sirius backed away from her bed and Armstrong took his place by her side. He began to cast diagnostic charms while Harry continued his conversation.

"Thank you for stopping," Harry said.

"Who are you to command me?" the snake asked curiously.

"I do not command you," Harry said. *"I can only ask as a courtesy for... the bitch."*

"Then I must continue," the snake explained beginning to slither around the tattooed skull. *"Master ordered me to continue until she answers the call."*

"She has felt the summons and now stands at her Lords' side," Harry explained to the serpent. *"Your work is done."*

The snake began to slow and came to a stop after thinking it over. *"I will extend you this courtesy until Master commands me again."*

"Thank you," Harry said as the tattoo went back to the static image normally associated with the Dark Mark. Harry looked up and saw Bellatrix, Healer Armstrong, and Sirius were all watching him closely. "Sorry about that but your Dark Mark doesn't speak English."

"I didn't know it spoke at all," Bellatrix murmured.

"It's quiet, but yeah," Harry explained. "I told him you felt the summons and are at your Lords' side. He agreed to stop until 'Master' commands him again."

"Fascinating," Healer Armstrong said with a grin.

"Don't you start," Harry interrupted the man. "We're not going to be fetal flobberworms for your experimentation. How's she doing?"

"Improving rapidly," Armstrong answered. "Might be well enough to leave soon, but I'd still prefer to keep her overnight." He turned towards Bellatrix, "I expect you'll get intermittent chills for the next few days and you'll feel quite weak. If after two weeks, you still get a chill, inform a healer. You may have to filter your blood again. Don't assume it's nothing."

Sirius assured Armstrong that one of the Lord Blacks would stick around all night, if not both. Armstrong was leaving for the night, but would be back in the morning and left instructions for no others to check on her.

Once the healer was gone, Bellatrix sagged back into her bed. "May I ask you something, my Lords?"

"Don't call us that when the situation doesn't dictate it," Harry said. "My name is Harry."

"You can call me your Lord," Sirius countered.

"Right," Bellatrix said looking between the two before looking down. "I just wondered... who was it? Who did I hurt or kill? Or who do you blame me for?"

Harry and Sirius looked at each other, partly wanting to keep her in the dark despite knowing the oath to the family should protect them. Harry asked, "What do you mean?"

Bellatrix kept her head down staring at her freshly healed wrists, not wanting to look up at them. "I know a look of hatred, a thirst for revenge. Both of you had that look in your eyes. So I wondered who it was that caused you to look at me that way."

Harry sighed and waved at Sirius to answer her.

"Sorry Bella," Sirius decided. "We'll protect you, because you are family. But that doesn't mean we trust you." He paused at the look of

sadness on her face when she closed her eyes. He felt like giving her a glimmer of hope adding, "Nor is that to say we never will."

"We just don't want to," Harry admitted pulling out the recliners for himself and Sirius.

Albus Dumbledore watched the faces of people as they entered the room. This was one of the better barometers for measuring the volatility of their current struggle against the Dark Lord Voldemort. When there were numerous smiling and laughing faces they were at their most relaxed. But when they looked somber and stayed quiet, it was because they could sense the oncoming danger, fearing the calm before a storm. The most violent atrocities and horrible actions of Voldemort had always come suddenly and then he would go silent to revel in the moments of fear he inspired.

Albus hoped this wasn't going to be one of those times. Based on the laughter coming from Remus, Tonks, and James Potter Jr., he felt he may not need to worry. But it did not escape Albus' notice that these three were the most likely to be singing the praises of the enigmatic Lord Blacks.

"Please everyone," Albus announced. "Be seated. We have a number of new items to discuss, as I'm sure anyone who has read today's paper will know."

There was muttering and curious conversations springing up all around the Order meeting.

"For those of you who may not have heard," Albus explained. "Bellatrix Black was admitted to St. Mungo's to be treated for some rather serious curse damage. She stayed overnight and was released into the custody of the two Lord Blacks, as the parties responsible for her well being. After her healer discharged her, he then called the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and informed them that Miss Black bore the Dark Mark on her arm."

Albus could easily tell the few who hadn't heard this news from the looks he was receiving. "I have spoken to Healer Armstrong wondering why he didn't contact the aurors immediately, and he

determined there were no outstanding warrants for her arrest, saw her commit no crime, and felt the allegiance issue was an internal family matter. He wasn't going to violate any patient confidentiality, but I believe he may have treated Lord Sirius Black in the past."

Albus held up a hand to forestall objections and said, "We may not have any proof of her crimes, but she could be an extremely valuable resource for the knowledge and experiences to which she could testify."

"What's the Ministry doing?" Bill Weasley asked.

Albus glanced at James Potter and then Tonks who both shrugged inconclusively. "They have no substantial evidence or implications of illegal activity, but they are seeking reasons to justifiably bring her in for questioning. The protection offered by her family complicates the issue both legally... and because they could simply hide her away at any time."

"What do you mean by the protection?" Arthur Weasley inquired.

"According to Healer Armstrong, the Lord Blacks were only willing to assist her after she disavowed her allegiance to the Dark Lord and pledged herself to the Black family. As a sworn member of an ancient and noble bloodline, her Lords assume some legal responsibility and culpability for her. The laws are a bit muddy, particularly among the noble families that predate the Ministry."

Albus pursed his lips and sat back for a moment. "I met Lord Harry Black for the first time before our Wizengamot session. He basically informed me that he was going to cause problems including 'a little friendly stabbing among dignitaries.' I assumed he was speaking metaphorically at the time." Albus frowned though his face twitched a little. "I was wrong."

Hestia Jones summarized, "So we've got the Lord of a dark family publicly stabbing others, associating with known Death Eaters, and now secreting away a valuable source of information?"

Albus nodded and continued. "There is also another thing I discovered from Healer Armstrong. He said that Lord Harry Black was capable of communicating with the Dark Mark."

More wary muttering sprung up. Tonks spoke up to try and prevent them from jumping to too many inaccurate conclusions, "Well, that's not all that surprising. I mean it is a magical snake tattoo and he is a parselmouth."

"He's a what?" James Potter clarified.

"A parselmouth," James Jr. answered with a nod from next to his father. "Harry told me and Uncle PJ he was always surprised animagi don't get grouped in with the same misconceptions. And that if people weren't so prejudiced about a language, maybe the nicer folks with the talent wouldn't have to keep it like some dirty secret."

"Maybe," Sturgis Podmore uncertainly agreed. "But even if it doesn't automatically turn him into a dark wizard, it is a warning sign. And there's an awful lot of warning signs popping up around these Lord Blacks."

"I saw him," Lily interjected. "Running down the hall in St. Mungo's with Bellatrix in his arms. She was really pale and looked dead, but he... he's not evil. He felt familiar."

"You saw him? Wait, you saw *her*?" James said in surprise. "And you never mentioned it before now?"

Lily had the grace to blush at her husband. "I barely even processed that it was her. I've been trying to figure out why he felt so familiar. When he was staring at me, it was like we were drawn to each other. To be honest, at first I thought I had a monster in my chest, rolling around and kicking to get out."

James leaned back warily asking, "Are you pregnant again?"

"No, heavens no. But I just can't figure out what it is about Ha-Harry," she stumbled over the name for a moment. "The only thing I could think of is that he reminds me of the son we lost, because our Harry would probably be just a little younger than him. And even now, when

I hear these accusations, my inclination is to jump to his defense and protect him.” Lily scratched her head. “I was hoping it was just some bad shrimp I ate, but... I don’t know.”

Remus had been squeezing his daughter’s leg under the table to keep her from saying anything she shouldn’t.

“That’s it,” James decided turning to his wife. “We’re going to get you completely checked out for compulsion curses, memory charms, the whole works.”

“I’m fine,” Lily said, scowling at her husband.

“You said you felt like you had a monster in your chest,” James argued. “Let’s just make sure you in fact don’t.”

Albus smiled and interrupted. “Nevertheless, it is imperative that we contact the Lord Blacks as soon as possible. I was thinking perhaps the Lupins and Potters could talk to them, or ideally arrange a meeting with myself.”

Tonks shrugged indifferently, looking to her adoptive father for an answer. Remus explained, “Tonks was brought back into the Black family as soon as Sirius was able to, and I, by extension, have been granted the same courtesy. But even we’ve been blocked access.”

“Floo’s closed and apparition’s warded,” Tonks answered. “And we used to be able to apparate right in. So I’m guessing they intentionally blocked us as a favor.”

“Cutting you off and refusing you permission is doing you a favor?” Sturgis asked.

Tonks nodded. “I’m already balancing my responsibilities and loyalties between the Order and the Ministry. Both of which have asked me to exploit my family connection. I can tell you the same thing I told Madame Bones: the connection does me no good in this instance.”

“Have you tried simply knocking on the front door?” James asked, not wanting this small mission to fall in his lap.

Tonks shrugged. "Back door is the one I use because of that stupid umbrella stand. And right now the door's got a sign that says '*Do Not Disturb (except in emergencies)*.' I'm inclined to trust my Lords on this one."

James saw people looking his way and said, "I only went by their family manor once because I was hoping to question Lord Black unofficially. They were... busier than I expected."

"Yes, yes," Albus grinned. "We all saw the pictures of Madame Bones. But if we cannot open a line of communication, then we may have to ask you to 'disturb' them, Miss Lupin."

"Why don't you just send an owl?" James Jr. suggested.

"I'm sure they've warded owl post if they've blocked even keyed in apparition," James condescendingly explained to his son.

James. Jr. shrugged. "Firefly delivered my letter this morning."

"You're writing to them?" James asked his son in disbelief.

James. Jr. nodded. "This was before I heard about the Death Eater, so Harry's probably busy."

"You shouldn't be writing to strangers," James scolded.

"Uncle PJ said he doubted they'd mind," James Jr. explained. "We talked with them and Tonks for half a day. That's not exactly a stranger."

Albus inquired, "Do you mind sharing your Uncle Peter's opinion of them?"

James Jr. shook his head. "He said the Lord Blacks are the type of allies who will likely drive you to horrible ruin or great fortune. But either way, you'll probably have a bit too much fun getting there."

"Just about hit the nail on the head with that assessment," Tonks mumbled.

Albus found himself concurring as well. "I shall send them a missive with Fawkes. But if they are not responsive, I wonder if you might wish to invite them to dinner at Godric's Hollow with your Uncle and the Lupins?"

James was going to dismiss the idea outright but Lily answered before he had a chance. "I think I'd like that whether they reply to you or not."

James groaned and planned to assign himself some overtime.

Sturgis looked at her like she was mad. "Death Eater? Parselmouth? Stabbing? Do these things mean nothing to you?"

Albus jumped in and explained, "I may not know the Lord Blacks well enough to judge the strength of their convictions, but I trust Remus and I trust Tonks. And their willingness to be protective of the Lord Blacks speaks highly of the trust they have in them."

Remus smiled at Albus and nodded at everyone looking his way.

"Now," Albus continued. "I think perhaps we've spent enough time talking about the Lord Blacks. Let's move on to other people of interest. James, why don't you tell us about these Death Eater Bandits?"

Remus had to pat his daughter on the back as she had started choking.

Sirius double-checked and saw Bellatrix was still napping in the sealed and warded guest bedroom. Kreacher had been instructed to relay all communication through Harry and him and to keep them apprised of her state.

He walked down to the muggle room and saw Harry was reading the letter that had arrived while they were turning a spare bedroom into a temporary gilded cage.

"Who's it from?" Sirius asked, plopping down next to Harry.

“Jimmy,” Harry answered. He repeated it proudly, “My little brother Jimmy. Writing the older brother he doesn’t even know he has for advice.”

Sirius groaned. “Please tell me you’re not turning into one of *them*.”

“I can’t help it,” Harry admitted gleefully. “I like the idea of having my very own little brother.”

“This is how it always starts,” Sirius grumbled to himself.

“And I feel like it’s my duty as his big brother to... you know...”

“Love and protect him,” Sirius spat out the words distastefully.

“What?” Harry looked at his godfather in confusion. “No. Fuck that. He’s got family for that. I’m his big brother. I’m supposed to *corrupt* him.”

Sirius looked at Harry hopefully.

“Send him some booze and porn, like a good big brother does.” Harry grinned deviously. “Besides, how do you think James would feel about that?”

Sirius was so proud of Harry at that moment he almost considered admitting it out loud. Luckily he was saved from the ethical dilemma of whether to show emotion or not by an ear-splitting scream from the guest bedroom.

They both leapt to their feet and ran down the hall. They burst into the room and saw Kreacher fretting over Bellatrix Black who was gritting her teeth and convulsing in obvious pain.

“It’s... him,” Bellatrix whispered when she saw Harry walk into view.

“Crap,” Harry said casting a stunner on her immediately.

Bellatrix’s violent shudders ceased instantly as she succumbed to unconsciousness.

“This could be a problem,” Harry said looking up at Sirius.

“Harry,” Sirius said pointing towards Bellatrix again.

Harry looked down and saw her body was still wracked with random spasms, despite her stunned state. “Bugger. Kreacher, go get several pain-relieving potions.”

“Voldemort’s torturing her through the mark?” Sirius clarified.

Harry nodded. “I was afraid of this. And because it’s tied into her soul, even stunning won’t help her that much.”

Kreacher returned with a half dozen sealed cups of potion. Harry woke Bellatrix and handed her one. “Drink this.”

Bellatrix started to reach for the potion but her arm was clearly not stable enough to hold the cup, so she helplessly opened her mouth.

Harry briefly wondered where this situation fell on the weird-o-meter in his life, as he slowly poured the potion into Bellatrix’s mouth. It took only ten seconds before her body had stopped shivering and she relaxed back into the bed.

“Thanks,” she said quietly.

“No problem,” Harry said incanting another stunning charm and sending her right back into unconsciousness.

Harry saw Sirius was watching Bellatrix with an unreadable expression on his face. “We’re going to have to do something about this.”

Sirius looked at Harry. “What can we do?”

Harry stopped to try and think of any possible solutions. With a burst of inspiration, he rolled up her sleeve to examine the Dark Mark. The tail of the snake was visible but the head was nowhere to be seen.

“*Hey,*” Harry hissed out in parseltongue as he leant down to her arm. “*Wake up. You there?*”

Harry looked up and saw Sirius was watching him before turning back towards the Dark Mark. *"I can see your tail. I know you're there."*

"Is he playing hide the snake head?" Sirius helpfully asked. "There was this girl I used to-OWW!" Sirius grabbed his eye. "Dammit Harry."

"I know you can hear me," Harry hissed. *"I just wanted to ask you a question."*

A few inches below the Dark Mark in a patch of unblemished skin, the image of the snake's head came bursting to the surface. *"You are not Master. Master commands."* It slithered right back up into the skull and once again only the tail was visible as its head disappeared hidden under the surface.

Harry stood back up. "Crap. He's going to be no help."

"I don't know that much about soul magic," Sirius said with a shrug. "But I know enough that breaking the spell would probably kill her."

"Not necessarily," Harry retorted as he settled into a chair near Bellatrix's bed. He deflated admitting, "But it'd probably destroy her soul... so yeah." Harry sighed as Sirius took the other chair. "Any ideas?"

Sirius shrugged. "You think we could manipulate the spell without breaking it?"

"It might be possible," Harry considered. "But we're probably working on a deadline of the pain driving her crazy. Not to mention I don't think anyone has ever been able to do anything with the mark."

"Healers probably won't be any help, will they?"

Harry shook his head. "Not unless they know more about the Dark Mark than I do, which I'm kinda doubting."

Sirius sat back in thought just observing Bellatrix as he and Harry descended into silence. "Well, historically a rabid stray bitch gets put down, but I don't really want to do that."

"I know," Harry grumbled. "She's hot."

"It's not that," Sirius explained. "It's just this Bellatrix is so different. She's meek. Even as a crazy psychotic murdering bitch she had a zest for life, or evil I suppose. Putting this one down wouldn't be the same as my real bitch of a cousin."

Harry found himself agreeing with Sirius. He couldn't see much of the Bellatrix he knew in this woman either.

Sirius waited a beat before adding, "And she's not exactly hard on the eyes either."

Harry shook his head as they lapsed into another thoughtful silence. After several minutes of quiet contemplation, Harry began to summarize, "Voldemort can torture her indefinitely. Trying to prevent the pain still damages her soul and will eventually drive her crazy. Separating the spell from her would kill her or leave her soulless. But that hardly matters because breaking the spell or manipulating it may very well be impossible."

"Impossible," Sirius repeated. "That sounds like your forte."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You can't honestly expect a solution to magically appear."

Kismet as always heeded the call and in a burst of flame, Fawkes appeared floating gently in front of Sirius. The phoenix warbled a greeting and landed on the edge of the dresser.

Harry glanced at the magical bird before looking up and saying, "You can't honestly expect a Philosopher's Stone to magically appear." He took a couple seconds thinking positive thoughts while Fawkes was tilting his head inspecting him. "Damn."

"It was a good try," Sirius admitted. He walked over towards the phoenix and showed his empty hand. "Hey Fawkes."

Fawkes nodded in greeting, having met Sirius before. He curled his head under his wing and produced a sealed envelope.

“Eurgh,” Harry commented. “As hot as phoenixes run at, you know that’s a moist armpit.”

Sirius took the envelope from Fawkes’ beak and held it up to his nose to smell. He quickly whipped the letter away and jerked his head back. “Good god. It smells like moldy old parchment.” Sirius took another look at the envelope. “Oh right.” Sirius opened the letter and began to read.

Harry walked over to Fawkes and let the bird smell his hand, before he began to scratch Fawkes on the back of his head. “How you doing, Fawkes,” Harry said. “Still like being rubbed back here?”

Fawkes let loose a rumbling purr of approval.

“You think you could do us a favor?” Harry asked hopefully. He stopped scratching when Fawkes turned to look at him.

Harry pointed. “Bellatrix is being tortured by Voldemort. You think maybe shedding a tear or two might help? Or some other ancient phoenix pain-relieving secret?”

Fawkes’ eyes widened and he just tilted his head at Harry in disbelief.

“I know. I’m surprised I’m asking too,” Harry said. “But phoenixes are some of the best healers in the magical world and I don’t really want her agony. Well, not right now at least.”

Fawkes hopped up into the air and beat his wings as he began to circle the small bedroom. He burst into a brilliant phoenix song that left Harry and Sirius both tingling happily.

Harry glanced over and saw Bellatrix’s body was shivering in discomfort from the effects of the phoenix song. Fawkes stopped his magical tune and landed right back on the edge of Harry’s chair as Bellatrix’s body relaxed.

“Oh yeah,” Harry said slowly in a moment of dawning realization. “Death Eater.”

Fawkes let out a laughing murmur of agreement.

"So what's Albus got to say?" Harry asked noticing Sirius was done with the letter.

"Here," Sirius said handing him the letter. "You read it."

Harry took the letter and saw it was short but as carefully worded as everything from Albus. Harry asked aloud, "He's not exactly subtle here, is he?"

"I think he's trying to win us over with honesty." Sirius scoffed with a shake of his head, "Like that'll work."

Harry looked over at Fawkes. "You know we can't do this. Does he honestly expect us to sell out a Black who just swore allegiance to the family?"

Fawkes looked almost embarrassed under Harry's scrutiny.

"You didn't expect us to, did you Fawkes?"

Fawkes shook his head in clear response.

"A letter has arrived, Masters," Kreacher announced as he walked in the room carrying a Ministry owl.

"Aren't we just the popular kids today," Sirius commented taking the letter as the owl flew away having delivered its note. "It's from Amy." Sirius read the contents of the letter and added, "Correction. It's from the Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Harry glanced at Fawkes. "We may have a response for you after all."

"The Wizengamot is going to have an unofficial but required bit of questioning for Bellatrix Black Friday afternoon at 1 PM. If she hasn't shown up by 2 PM, they have a warrant to search for her in Grimmauld Place, including the destruction of any wards in the way."

Harry raised a curious eyebrow at Fawkes and turned towards Sirius. "We get two days notice to properly hide her away out of the country?"

"Is that what we're going to do?" Sirius asked.

"I doubt it," Harry said while summoning a piece of parchment and a pen. He began to write a response for Albus.

Sirius walked over and saw the letter addressed to the Headmaster. "What are you telling him?"

"I am thanking him for his concern," Harry explained while writing. "But informing him that there is an immediate health risk we must address first. After all, it's not like the Dark Lord will quietly accept one leaving his service. And I'm telling him we look forward to resolving the issue at the Wizengamot on Friday."

"You think he might be able to help us?"

Harry was just finishing the letter and looked up at Sirius and Fawkes. "I think we'd be betraying a Black no matter how well-intentioned his help might be."

"Even if we don't come up with anything," Sirius asked doubtfully. "You think she'd rather constant agony than the annoyance of guilt trips, twinkling eyes, and offers of sweets?"

Fawkes was clearly amused to be sitting in on this.

Harry handed the note to Sirius to look over. "I'm still not sure why she came to us, but you know she had to have considered going to Albus for help. She chose us for whatever reason. And I'm guessing it was partially because we wouldn't immediately run to the high and mighty Albus Dumbledore."

Sirius handed the note back having nothing to add. "I know you've had some problems with him in the past—"

"Hang on," Harry stopped him and handed the note to Fawkes. "There's a spy for Dumbledore in our midst."

Fawkes took the note from Harry, and flicked his wing under his chin in a gesture that was clearly a phoenix insult. He warbled a goodbye that sounded less than friendly and flashed away. After the flames

disappeared, the Lord Blacks were alone once more to watch Bellatrix suffer silently.

Harry hadn't ever seen Fawkes do that before. "I think he just gave me the equivalent of flipping the bird."

"As a bird, he might take offense to that," Sirius said. "But what I was saying is that when it comes to answers, Dumbledore is one of the people usually worth asking."

"Yeah, I know," Harry said. "But you're basing that off of your impressions of a different man. And he sees Bella as an asset to be utilized. We see her as family."

"I don't usually like my family," Sirius pointed out.

"Me neither," Harry agreed recalling his own experiences. "But she's still family. And for what it's worth, I'm doubtful he could do anything for her that we haven't."

The two of them went back to their chairs and resumed watching over the woman causing them so much trouble.

Harry was re-reading the letter Amy had sent in an official capacity. He was still surprised at the differences in the way the rules applied to the so-called noble pureblood leaders. Harry's musings were interrupted as Sirius smacked himself in the forehead.

"Of course," Sirius exclaimed. "I know why she came to us. It's because of who we are, the Lords Black."

"Yeah," Harry said. "I got that much."

"No, no," Sirius argued. "I mean she's a pureblood following tradition. My mum used to be Head of the Family, but she was never the Lord. That's why Bellatrix could freely associate herself with another Lord, including pledge herself into his service."

"Voldemort's not even a real Lord though," Harry said.

"Tell him that," Sirius chuckled. "But the point is, now that the Black family has a Lord, or two in this case, we're the only ones who could rightfully reclaim her from her previous pledge. She's never been expelled from the family so she's had to answer to both him and us, until we forced her to deny *him*."

"So even though she has abandoned him," Harry continued. "When she was loyal, he cast the mark binding her soul to an extent."

"Not a very trusting guy, is he?"

"Nope," Harry agreed. "Not really."

"She's ours," Sirius said fully comprehending the situation. "She was born into the family and raised by it. Our claim and her free will supersede any tenuous claim he could make."

"You're acting like she's a hunk of property," Harry said thinking they were doing the exact thing he was criticizing Dumbledore for.

"Vassal, servant, slave, whatever you want to call it," Sirius said. "We're Lords of a family. And that which is part of the family, belongs to the family, and therefore us, as keepers."

"So the root of the problem is that neither she nor us has ever owned the piece of magic on her arm," Harry exclaimed in frustration. "I think we're back to the point where asking nicely isn't going to help us any."

"In matters of dispute," Sirius recounted. "Lords of equal stature depend on the magic to decide who is right."

Harry grimaced. "Any chance there's a simple spell that does that?"

Sirius shook his head. "The magic cedes to the victor of a duel."

Harry had seen the answer coming but hoped that it wasn't the case. "Peachy. So we just need to defeat Voldemort in a duel." He sighed tiredly not even looking towards Sirius.

"It'd be a Lords' duel," Sirius cheered way too happily. "House of Black versus House of Voldemort. But two against one because of our status."

"This isn't a solution," Harry said shaking his head. "Besides getting killed or getting our asses kicked, it won't change the fact that he's not a real Lord."

"We can take him," Sirius said with more confidence than he felt. "From the sound of it this one's not even as strong as our old one."

Harry groaned as an idea hit him. "Ahh crud."

"There it is," Sirius grinned victoriously. "What do you got?"

"I just realized it doesn't matter that he's not a recognized Lord. And in fact it actually gives him more reason to duel us," Harry ruefully said.

"Perfect," Sirius agreed. "How's that?"

"The Council of Lords," Harry explained. "When I was reading up on the history of the Wizengamot, the Council of Lords was the ruling body before the establishment of the Ministry. With the Ministry's inception, they became the legislative and judicial branch and were then officially called the Wizengamot."

"Am I getting an explanation or a history lesson?"

"The point is the old rules of the Council still apply. And if a Lord chooses to meet a lesser family head in a Lords' duel, a victory by the lesser would grant him the official title of Lord."

"So he'd *really* be a Lord if he defeats us?" Sirius clarified.

"If we make it a Lords' duel, yeah," Harry nodded. "And technically it'd put a Voldemort seat on the Wizengamot too as a noble line."

"Oh that's priceless!" Sirius laughed. "We have got to do this. Even if we lose, we're fucking over the Wizengamot."

“If we lose, we’re probably going to be dead, you realize.”

Sirius shrugged. “I wanna go out with a bang.”

Harry sighed. “I can’t believe I’m actually considering this, but let’s look at it logically...”

Sirius felt his adrenaline racing in ways that good old-fashioned robbery had never incited. He was cataloging every aspect of their environment worth noting.

They were in the middle of Badgin Alley, a small magical district in Wales.

Four Death Eaters were unconscious with bruises, lying in a pile off to their right. The fifth Death Eater they’d sent off with instructions to fetch his Master as the Lord Blacks had some urgent business with him.

The sixth and final Death Eater of the failed raid was writhing under the boot of Harry, who was chatting excitedly with the man’s Dark Mark.

Just last night, Sirius had managed to talk Harry into this hodge-podge of a plan. In between painkilling potions, they’d uncovered this attack Bellatrix wasn’t supposed to know about but did.

Harry had been exercising his magic all day. He drilled into Sirius’ head the fact that they needed to work together to have any chance to win this. Even Sirius had agreed that dueling Dark Lords without a plan was a bad idea.

The unconscious Death Eaters were warded off from the growing crowd beginning to gather in Badgin Alley. Sirius just hoped Voldemort would show up before the aurors did.

Half a dozen pops sounded and six more masked Death Eaters appeared. “Showtime,” Sirius whispered towards Harry as they got up to approach them.

“*Crucio!*” the man in front called out aiming straight for Sirius.

A rock off to the side flew up and blocked the curse, while Harry and Sirius didn’t even blink continuing to walk towards the new arrivals.

“We don’t have time to deal with servants,” Sirius bellowed. “Where is your Lord?”

A Killing Curse was cast and yet another rock flew up to intercept the spell. Harry’s invisible magical arms leapt into action, yanking the caster forward. The man’s legs both snapped at impossible angles breaking them loudly. “That spell was intended to kill me. You know by law, I can torture you for days. And in ways that would make you long for your Lord’s tender mercies.”

Harry ripped the man’s sleeve off with only a thought and immediately began talking to his Dark Mark. “*Seeing as how your Master isn’t here, do you think you could get the marks on these other people to jolt?*”

The Dark Marks responded and the other Death Eaters all jumped, disturbing their initial shock at discovering a parselmouth.

“The Lords Black,” a whisper carried down the Alley from the other direction.

“Lord Voldemort,” Sirius called out loudly as he and Harry turned their backs to the remaining Death Eaters.

Another Killing Curse was sent at Harry’s back and the downed Death Eater with broken legs jerked up into the path of the deadly spell. Harry let him fall to the ground dead, turning his attention back towards the darkness of the Alley in front of him.

“Or rather Voldemort, since calling oneself Lord does not make it so,” Harry corrected Sirius. He peered through the darkness and saw the glowing form of an extremely powerful wizard. “I wonder Tom, if there had been a G in your name, would you have called yourself a God?”

“You are even more foolish than I’d been led to believe,” Voldemort hissed out making his presence known as he emerged from the shadows.

Another curse was sent towards Harry's back and another downed Death Eater was thrust into the path of it.

"Your servants are costing you servants," Harry commented. "You might want to tighten their leashes."

"Why is it you two traitors are so eager to die tonight?" Voldemort asked looking around for signs of a trap.

"Bellatrix Black was a Black long before she made the mistake of pledging herself to a false Lord. You knew the magic would never see you as a proper Lord, so you ensured your slaves' loyalty with a rather ingenious piece of soul magic hidden behind a serpent tattoo."

"I don't have time for this," Voldemort said calmly. "I had hoped to see you by my side-"

Sirius interrupted him and firmly intoned, "As her Lords, we demand control of the Mark on her soul."

"You come to me with demands," Voldemort snapped. He clenched a fist as his magic came bubbling to the surface. "I am the Dark Lord Voldemort! And I will teach you to fear me before I squeeze the last breath from your frail broken bodies."

Harry shook his head at Voldemort's predictability. "You know your wizarding history, Tom." Harry held out his wand in front of him and forced his voice to carry to all ends of the Alley. "The House of Black is challenging the House of Voldemort to a Lords' duel for control of the mark on Bellatrix Black's soul."

Thick ancient magic began swirling in the air awaiting the response from the Dark Lord. The crowds were watching in silence and even the Death Eaters still alert were transfixed by the scene before them.

"Draw your wand," Sirius ordered, shifting into a dueling position directly in front of Harry. "Or leave like a coward."

"Are we going to have to chase you?" Harry lackadaisically mocked, while ignoring the nausea in the back of his throat. "Or would you like to earn your self-proclaimed title of Lord?"

The answer was given without any sign or warning. A sickly pale yellow curse exploded from the wand of the Dark Lord Voldemort. The magic surrounding them all began to hum in eager anticipation of a victor.

Sirius' eyes widened at the sheer power of the spell heading towards him. He swallowed rather loudly wondering just how this had seemed like a good idea.

Harry felt the moment the challenge was accepted and gulped almost as loudly as Sirius. He placed his hand on his godfather's shoulder, preparing to move them both. "Here we go. Try not to die."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Gah!” Sirius shrieked as Harry apparated them both five feet to the side. The ground where they had been standing dried and crackled instantly after the curse hit.

Sirius looked at Harry as the younger man thrust his hand out, a solid shield appearing in place. A loud clang and crack made Sirius flinch as Harry yanked them to the ground. The solid shield held, but just barely. “What do you mean try not to die?”

“Less talk,” Harry said gritting his teeth. Another super-charged purple spell slammed into the shield Harry was holding, shattering it to dust. “More cursing.”

Harry grabbed Sirius’ shoulder again and apparated them out of the way of a searing jet of blue fire.

“Actually,” Harry said turning Sirius around to face the Dark Lord. “You need to learn something. Put up a shield.”

Sirius saw three cannon shots of a semi-dark bludgeoning curse barreling down on them. He cast a humming magical shield, reinforced it, and hunched down to make a smaller target.

Harry prepared himself and heard Sirius’ shield tinkle as it broke like the thinnest sheet of glass. The spiraling bludgeoning curse hit dead center in the solar plexus of the crouching Sirius Black.

The dragon hide armor was put to the test, but absorbed the lion’s share of the spell. The force was still enough to send Sirius careening backwards into Harry, and both of them careening backwards sliding to a stop in a small wooded area on the opposite side of the alley.

“Fuck me,” Sirius swore as a dark green barely visible hex zipped through the air towards the two of them.

A nearby rotted log jerked diagonally, blocking the curse but spraying the two Lord Blacks with wet wood.

Two metal spears shot through the air at both Harry and Sirius before they could even get to their feet. Two heavy stones blocked the spikes' path, sending one veering off towards the tops of the trees, while the other flipped forward and embedded itself into the ground in front of them.

"I thought you called yourselves Lords," Voldemort taunted. "Can you not-" He stopped suddenly and apparated away as one of his conjured spears zoomed through the place he had been standing. It made a loud echoing *THUNK* as the spear embedded half a meter into a wooden post.

"Come on, Sirius," Harry said as a half dozen pieces of debris began orbiting protectively around them. "I got the defense, you get the offense. Heavy and fast curses."

Sirius was a bit twitchy beginning to finally comprehend what they'd signed up for but centered himself and put on his game face. "We got this." He began twirling his wand, gathering energy as the tip started to glow. His wand began to whistle quietly in eager anticipation.

The two of them walked calmly from the small copse of trees, while a half dozen rocks and logs circled them dangerously.

Voldemort was standing there, holding his wand lazily at the side, squinting at the two Lord Blacks and the various solid objects moving randomly around them. "What magic is this?"

Sirius said nothing as he whipped his wand underhand and sent the nonverbal spell that had been building up arcing through the air towards Voldemort. It weaved left and right bobbing slowly before accelerating suddenly on a straight path to the Dark Lord.

The solid shield Voldemort pushed into existence was a step too late and barely deflected the curse as it glanced off his shoulder. The Dark Lord stumbled but did not fall, only exhaling loudly when his right shoulder purpled yet never tore.

Harry knew it was coming and made no effort to block the spell fired behind him as a red jet of light flew right past his ear and nowhere near Sirius.

“Dammit,” Harry swore softly at the miss.

Sirius was about to cast another spell when Harry jerked him down and the neon green of a Killing Curse sailed right over them both, slamming into the trigger-happy Death Eater behind them.

Sirius grunted as he hit the ground. “I thought you’d block-”

“That one wasn’t aimed at us,” Harry explained while keeping them covered as they rose.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Sirius muttered.

“No one touches them until I’m done,” Voldemort shouted, staring down the Death Eaters assembled behind Harry and Sirius. “If any of you cost me this duel, it will be on your head.”

“If he’s off aim even a centimeter,” Harry said urging Sirius to stay focused. “There’s a reason.”

Sirius shot off three rapid fire spells that the Dark Lord deflected with ease. “Told you it wouldn’t work.”

“Meh,” Harry grunted knowing that if the servants of one of the Lords interfered, then that House forfeited the duel. “It could’ve happened if their aim wasn’t so horrid.”

Another two spells came rocketing from Voldemort’s wand and Harry got two planks into their paths. They exploded in fire, showering the Lord Blacks with burning cinders. The dragon hide cloaks just sloughed off the wreckage while the Dark Lord cast a complicated oculamagi spell over his eyes making them glow a bright red.

Sirius let loose a sickly decaying curse at the ground the Dark Lord was standing on.

Voldemort apparated straight backwards, returning fire with a hail of slicing curses, and then pausing to watch them hit.

Harry got rocks in the way of the curses headed towards them, letting the ones that were going to miss, fly harmlessly through the air around him.

With a diagonal slash, Sirius shot off two bone-breakers at the Dark Lord's right shoulder and left knee.

Voldemort slid a half step to the side and paid no attention to the two spells just missing his shoulder and flying between his legs. Another flurry of darker slicing curses designed to cleave through magical shields came this time speckled in white.

The largest remaining pieces of debris again protected Harry and Sirius while the other slicing curses flew past. Two of them connected with Harry's invisible magical arms, severing the magic cleanly at the point of contact.

Harry fell to a knee from the backlash of his own oversaturated magic. "Fuck. He figured that out pretty damn quick." The sudden magical shift was more short intense pain than slow ache and it left Harry winded.

Sirius abandoned the longer incantation he'd started and just began focusing rapid fire pellet shots at the Dark Lord. Each whip of his wand let out a crack of angry magic and zipped off a small, icy projectile.

Voldemort called up another solid shield that they hit with a ping, barely denting the surface. He hissed in annoyance as one of Sirius' shots connected with his lower leg.

"Stay with me, Harry," Sirius called, running out of juice from his relentless pellet spree.

"Enough!" Voldemort boomed loudly, slamming his fist into the ground. A deep rumbling shockwave of force knocked Sirius off his feet and Harry back down as he had begun to rise.

"You are not without your talents," Voldemort admitted in what he felt was a compliment. "Join me. You are powerful wizards. I will make you stronger."

Sirius snapped out a single pellet from his wand in response.

Voldemort held his hand up and let the nuisance spell smash into his palm. It stung and broke the surface of his pale skin, but was not deep.

Harry sensed an opportunity to catch his breath and quickly downed a pepper-up potion, while floating a dose to Sirius.

The three duelers all were watching each other carefully, taking a few moments to observe their opponents and plot out their next actions.

Voldemort was staring at Harry, focusing his red glowing spelled eyes on the younger Lord Black. He noticed a faint echo of magic and asked, "Where did you get that scar?"

Even though Harry highly doubted it would be a problem, he was still greatly relieved to feel no twinge of life or activity in his curse scar, no matter his proximity to this Dark Lord. "Just some old over-confident bastard," Harry answered with a smirk. He immediately sensed the Dark Lord's silent attempt at *Legilimency* and ejected the probe with excessive force.

"Watch your mind and your eye contact," Harry warned to Sirius.

Voldemort hissed and flinched from the abrupt violent mental push. He hoped dividing his *Legilimency* probe between the Lord Blacks would make them subtle enough to not be noticed. He encountered no *Occlumency* shields at all and caught a single snippet from each of them before being thrown out and losing his connection.

He took a closer look around at the crowds gathering and continued to internally stockpile spells. He saw his Death Eaters warily assessing the contingent of aurors that had just arrived at the tavern down the alley. "Go. Take them with you."

The Death Eaters able to move quickly grabbed their unconscious mates, leaving the three dead ones behind. They apparated away before the aurors could stop them.

“So this was your grand plan?” Voldemort said, airily waving his hand at all the destruction they had caused. “Tempt me with a Lords’ duel, hope to last long enough for the aurors to arrive, and then what? Concede while they foolishly attempt to trap me? They are not strong enough and the Lords’ duel prevents their interference. What could you honestly hope to accomplish with this futile exercise?”

“We don’t give a shit about the aurors,” Sirius answered as the steam from a pepper-up whistled out his ears. “This is merely a family matter for us.”

“If it is death you seek,” Voldemort announced, watching the aurors fail in their attempts to erect wards over the Lords and the area between them. “Then death I shall give you.”

The Dark Lord voiced no spell and made no motion other than to clench his fist tightly in front of him. A kaleidoscope of magic erupted from his hand, expanding into a giant wave, each color a different spell, a different curse, and a different way to hurt or kill.

Harry grabbed onto Sirius’ shoulder and tried to apparate away. He slammed into an anti-apparition jinx he’d yet to notice and was left staggering from the attempt.

Every piece of debris Harry could reach was frantically thrown at the myriad of violent spells contained in a single rainbow wave of magic. The dirt on the ground was splashed up to try to disrupt curses when rocks couldn’t be found. But the efforts were futile. Half a dozen spells ripped through both Sirius and Harry’s bodies lifting them off their feet and carrying them ten meters through the air. The most damage was done to the exposed areas of skin while the dragon hide was pushed to its limits before cracking and shredding.

Harry was knocked senseless and he moaned in protest wondering what had happened. He let out a labored breath as the memories came back to him. He saw the green of a Killing Curse headed for him and his magical arms quickly propelled him into the air just avoiding the spell that smacked into the ground below him. He landed on his feet only to see the Dark Lord had already cast another Killing Curse at his other opponent.

Harry heard Sirius begin to moan in pain just before he dove right on top of his godfather. Using his momentum to roll them both away from the deadly spell, Harry earned even louder cries from Sirius as both of their thrashed bodies were jostled.

Harry's magic reacted instinctively grabbing a bunch of debris to protect them. No longer was it circling around them exposing his magical arms to harm. Instead the debris was hovering right in front of them, shielding them from the hail of curses that the Dark Lord sent their way.

Sirius was levitated off the ground and Harry slung the older man's arm over his shoulder, holding the weakened man up. They were both on their feet now, and Harry's shields were diverting or blocking most of the Dark Lord's spells. The ones that couldn't be blocked, Harry was able to run or dodge away from successfully. Focusing only on the defensive, Harry was whispering at Sirius to wake up, knowing that Voldemort could hear him.

The Dark Lord was two thirds of the way into summoning a pool of hellfire, when a sudden pop alerted him to the fact that his anti-apparition jinx had been countered without his notice.

Through the shield of debris, he could see only one Lord Black.

Sirius had been dazed from Voldemort's rekindled onslaught but quickly regained control of his faculties. Harry had been pinching him and Sirius heard the stilted way Harry was whispering. Sirius continued to play possum while gently breaking down the Dark Lord's anti-apparition jinx. When he felt it break he didn't even bother to look up. He simply apparated directly to the Dark Lord's right. Not wanting to waste a moment with wand waving or a voiced spell, Sirius used two open hands to slam Voldemort's bruised and purpled shoulder with wandless concussion charms.

Voldemort hadn't even seen the attack coming before he was blasted sideways through the glass window of a china shop's teacup display. His shoulder that had taken the brunt of the blow had split open and was coating his entire arm in blood.

Harry apparated right behind Sirius and gathered fresh pieces of rock, floating in formation waiting to block the next spell headed their way.

“That,” Voldemort hissed dangerously while stepping out from the broken storefront, “was a mistake.”

Sirius fired off a pair of dark burning curses that just fizzled out in the air surrounding the furious Dark Lord.

Voldemort huffed in pain as he pressed his hand over his bleeding shoulder. The blood flowing down his arm darkened until it was black and ceased to flow. Voldemort stared down at the two Lord Blacks without an ounce of fear. “It won’t happen again.”

An orange spell came shooting out Voldemort’s open palm while he snapped his wand igniting a long fiery whip. The largest log exploded when the orange spell connected and the whip snaked through the air destroying two more of the rocks and sending the shards raining down on Harry and Sirius.

Harry cast a magical shield just in time, while Sirius sent off a bludgeoning and a spearing curse with another happy whistle from his wand.

Voldemort was inching closer and working his magical whip through every piece of protection Harry could grab. The two spells from Sirius smacked into the Dark Lord with a flash of light, but didn’t even slow his forward progress for a moment.

The Dark Lord snapped his wand with a flourish releasing his hold on the magical whip that sliced through the air and wrapped around both Lord Blacks.

It took Harry more effort than he would have liked to dispel the fire binding that had singed both himself and Sirius. All the while the Dark Lord just kept laying on spell after spell, randomly switching his targets from Harry to Sirius and back again.

Voldemort saw this as a challenge in more ways the one. He wasn’t putting everything he had into each spell, instead focusing on quantity. But he wanted to prove to all watching how futile opposing him was.

He was actively destroying each and every attempt at a physical shield, faster than Harry could thrust them in the way of the spells. For every spell he bothered to verbalize, two more silent ones were cast without wasting a breath. More than two spells a second for fifteen seconds, and Voldemort was connecting cleanly every fourth or fifth spell.

Harry was doing all he could to defend, but the Dark Lord was just too quick for him to keep up.

Sirius hadn't been able to cast anything significant in response as he was forced to defend from the numerous spells that Harry couldn't. Harry had warned Sirius that even in this world, he expected the Dark Lord to be faster and stronger than either of them. But they had numbers and a few other advantages in their favor, so Harry figured they had a good chance to win. Another stinging hex hit deep enough to draw blood on Sirius' wand arm, and he began to understand why Harry hadn't been as confident as he was.

Harry was summoning shards of the broken storefront, the trees, the rocks, everything within reach and furiously tried to keep up with the Dark Lord's pace. He knew he was missing a third of the spells now but he was focused on blocking the most dangerous ones. A metal blade was spinning through the air towards Sirius that Harry just barely deflected away in time. He hadn't even seen the dark slicing curses coming before two magical arms were severed and he fell to the ground, screaming unprepared for the painful backlash.

Sirius saw Harry fall and quickly changed tactics. He went on the offensive and fired a cutter followed immediately with a dark crucifixion curse aimed at Voldemort's heart.

Voldemort had been timing his spells, planning on Harry's reaction. He hefted a solid shield in his open hand and batted away both of Sirius' curses with barely a thought. He lunged towards Sirius and put his all into the next curse, snarling, "*Crucio!*"

Sirius wanted to dodge. He wanted to get something in the path of the curse. But the sheer velocity and hatred emanating off the spell didn't even give him time to blink before it slammed him, driving him into the ground. His entire body burned in pain on a level he'd not

even imagined, completely unaware that he was screaming his throat raw.

Harry hadn't even caught his breath when he heard Voldemort cast a spell with more intensity than anything in the previous five minutes. He looked on in horror as his godfather's body began smoldering the moment the Unforgivable connected. The scream nearly tore at Harry's heart and he knew Sirius wouldn't last long under that curse. Harry's magical arms were moving as fast as he could think as a chunk of rock slammed into Voldemort's wand hand and two other arms pulled Sirius away and safely behind Harry.

The screaming had stopped and pitiful moans replaced it, but Harry knew Sirius was just about down for the count. Harry needed to give Voldemort something else to think about or he would have to sincerely consider cutting their losses and running. He wanted to protect Bellatrix, but he wasn't about to choose her over Sirius' life.

No longer seeking out debris for shields, Harry's arms were now looking for weapons. Every decent sized rock was picked up and thrown at the Dark Lord at high velocity. Half a dozen solid projectiles coming from different angles connected with Voldemort before he could get up a large enough physical shield.

Pressing the advantage, Harry began to cast spells designed to destroy and eat the shields Voldemort kept invoking. He'd heard a crack and suspected he'd broken the Dark Lord's leg, but wasn't about to let up.

Voldemort stepped back from the sudden attack, frustrated as he alternated between shielding himself from rocks, spears, and broken glass, while fending off the spells headed towards him. His anger and frustration reached its boiling point and he began cursing Harry right back, trading off the occasional rock or weaker spell, in exchange for sending a curse in return.

Harry was doing his best to stay on the offensive, but it wasn't long before Voldemort's superior skill made up the difference. A dark slicing curse aimed for one of Harry's magical arms was avoided, but it clipped him on the cheek, splitting the side of his face open. He saw

Sirius was still down and just hoped the Dark Lord was tired enough to make a mistake.

In one smooth motion Harry slipped his ash wand back into its arm holster while drawing his old holly wand from the holster on the other arm.

Voldemort was done taking chances and saw Harry had lined up with Sirius. He flicked his wand sideways then straight shouting out, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Feeling a bit mischievous Harry made no move from the path of the curse and shouted his own spell, "*Densaugeo!*"

Just as Harry had planned the two spells collided in midair and linked together, feeding back into their casters' wands.

The surprise showed on Voldemort's face as the near brother wands combined to create the *Priori Incantatem* effect.

A steady stream of magic was pouring from both duelists' wands connected in the middle of them and blossoming outward. A crackling iridescent dome of magic surrounded both men, cutting them off from the outside world, and pitting the pair against each other in a magical battle of wills.

Harry knew exactly what was happening and pressed his advantage, focusing all of his energy onto forcing the growing central ball of magic in the linked stream to flow back towards Voldemort's wand. Harry's magical arms folded themselves back inside so as to allow Harry to dedicate his complete focus to the task at hand.

Voldemort understood well enough that their wands had linked and they were now engaged in a challenge of willpower. The sheer volume of magic going into the wands and into the massive webbed cage surrounding them was blinding to the oculamagi spell on his eyes. He could feel the magic in the link slipping towards him, but all he could see was white where the spells had collided.

Voldemort didn't know why or how this phenomenon happened, but he could tell Harry knew it was coming. Voldemort concluded this

because Harry had been cocky enough to cast a teeth growing curse, indicating that the spells may be revisited upon the caster. He knew he couldn't afford to lose this test of will, and tried to force the spell back towards Harry.

The Dark Lord knew it wasn't working but he couldn't see what was even happening. When he caught a glimpse of Harry, he saw no magical arms visible anywhere. Quickly deciding he shouldn't be wasting magic either, he focused his own hatred at breaking the oculamagi spell on his eyes. He wasn't going to waste a drop of his magic and he desperately needed to see clearer.

Harry was pushing the oversized magical glob back, almost far enough to reach the Dark Lord's wand, inciting the spell regurgitation when suddenly Voldemort shouted in triumph and his eyes stopped glowing red. Harry realized the Dark Lord had managed to cancel that spell while still holding off Harry's will. The pressure on Harry nearly doubled and the magical balls reversed direction heading closer towards Harry's wand tip.

Harry dug deep inside looking for that extra something and stopped the progress of the magical marker on the linked spells. They'd reached a tentative stalemate, as the bulging magical balls would drift forward a half meter, and then right back.

A haunting and eerie phoenix song began to echo around the golden dome. Some braver members of the crowd watching including aurors and members of the Order were standing right up next to the edge of the dome staring at it in wonder and unable to cross it.

Harry chanced a glance over his shoulder and saw through the dome that Sirius was no longer on his back, but had gotten up to his knees. The brief lapse in concentration cost Harry and the largest central glob moved even closer to Harry's side.

He gritted his teeth and halted its progress, pushing it back towards the Dark Lord as much as he could.

The wands in their hands were spewing excess sparks in all directions scalding both duelists. The sheer volume of magic being channeled was heating the wands up as they burned against the

hands clenching them. Smoke rose from their sizzling hands but neither Harry nor Voldemort would ever contemplate conceding. They stared each other down, not allowing their concentration on the linked spells to drift.

Harry took the first step forward, shortening the stream of magic and pushing the beachball-sized glob back towards Voldemort a small amount.

Voldemort saw the ball grow bigger and get a little closer. He responded by taking a step towards Harry, gaining even more ground than he had lost.

It was by unspoken agreement that they both started to slowly step closer, shortening the linked stream and increasing the pressure on themselves.

The sizzling dome of magic protected them completely, flashing solid as the intensity of the battle increased. Harry could feel his strength leaving him, but refused to lose this battle of wills. Voldemort may be faster and more powerful, Harry thought, but his will was stronger. He would not lose this, no matter what Voldemort was on the other side.

Voldemort was focused exclusively on pushing the growing ball of magic back towards Harry.

“Oooh tingly!” Ginny Weasley exclaimed as she suddenly found herself floating in the middle of a massive magical glob. She heard a hiss of surprise and turned to see a frightened and sweaty Dark Lord in the midst of a very tense duel. She slowly turned her head to the other side and easily recognized Harry, despite the bloody mess covering his cheek and neck.

She looked back at Voldemort and Harry once more before announcing the decision she had made. “I’ll come back later.” Her ghostly form disappeared leaving only the bright glowing magic of their linked wands in her wake.

Voldemort was disturbed and shaken by the ghost’s sudden appearance and his focus began to stray.

Harry saw his opportunity and sprinted five steps until he was barely three meters from the Dark Lord. The jiggling mass of magic ballooned and was now reaching its breaking point. The haunting sound of the phoenix cry was cresting at a fevered pitch.

Voldemort braced for the sudden jolt on his magic but held firm.

The strain of forcing himself to halve the distance between them was crushing Harry. He fell to one knee but kept his wand arm steady as his hands continued to burn.

Harry was trembling from the effort, sweat pouring off his forehead. He looked up at the Dark Lord as the magical glob began to teeter right up against Harry's wand tip. Harry saw the look of a victorious man standing proudly over a defeated foe on his knees.

Harry's stern look of concentration slipped for just a moment, allowing a ghost of a smile to cross his face. He saw the Dark Lord's pupils widen in fear as the dormant magic in Harry sprung to violent life. A mere two invisible magical arms exploded from Harry's body grabbing opposite sides of the Dark Lord's head and wrenching it with every ounce of magic Harry had.

The division of Harry's focus from the battle of wills was not without its costs. The *Priori Incantatem* effect flooded rapidly into Harry's wand. His bloody burnt hand was still clenched around the holly wand when the channel filled beyond its limit and exploded into splinters. A ghostly haze of spells erupted and began to dissipate almost immediately.

The muffled bloody pop of the wand's combustion was barely noticeable as the dome of magic surrounding the duelers softly fluttered off and the ear-splitting crack of the Dark Lord's neck snapping like a twig echoed throughout the entire alley.

Everyone watching the duel in rapt awe had gone silent as death when they could suddenly see the two other combatants clearly. Lord Harry Black was on his knees looking like he might collapse at any moment. And the Dark Lord Voldemort was floating a meter off the ground. His entire body hanging limply, his wand seared directly into the flesh of his palm. The Dark Lord's red eyes were swirling in

restrained fury despite the unnatural way his chin was pointed up and over his shoulder. The people behind the Dark Lord could see shards of bloody bone sticking out at the base of his neck.

Harry took a deep breath and shuddered as his magical arms jerked again. Another series of snaps and crackles announced more torn muscles and broken bones as the Dark Lord Voldemort's head now faced completely in the wrong direction.

Sirius was the first person to react, jumping to his feet and charging into the fray to help his godson. He tried casting a Killing Curse but was unable to in his current state. He then aimed a decapitation curse at the unmoving body of the Dark Lord. It missed completely. Growling in frustration, he finally fired a blasting curse that connected with the Dark Lord's thigh, exploding with blood and sending the man flying from Harry's grip. Voldemort's body landed in a crumpled heap and Sirius aimed another blasting curse at him.

The aurors again failed to erect any apparition or portkey wards surrounding the duelists as the magic of the Lords' duel hadn't reached completion.

Harry had fallen to his hands and knees in sheer exhaustion, but he still wasn't surprised to hear the Dark Lord whisper a trigger word in parseltongue, "*Return.*"

The portkey activated whisking away the paralyzed and broken body of the Dark Lord just before Sirius' second blasting curse could connect.

The ancient magic in the air called forth by the duel came to fruition and had identified a victor.

Harry and Sirius felt a rush of foreign magic, giving them a slight burst of energy.

Sirius limped over to Harry who was in the process of wrapping his bloody burnt wand hand with gauze. He pulled Harry up to his feet as they both felt the adrenaline leaving their systems.

Sirius saw a number of people headed towards them and knew they weren't ready to deal with questions right now. He wrapped an arm around Harry with a tired smile and said, "I don't know about you, but I could use a nap."

Harry chuckled a bit deliriously but held on, letting Sirius apparate them both back to Grimmauld Place.

The pair arrived in the foyer and crashed to the ground, unwilling to expend any energy on balance.

"Oww," Harry winced landing on his right hand, aggravating the holly splinters that were all that remained of his first wand.

"Sorry," Sirius said, panting from exhaustion. "Kreacher!"

With a pop, the house elf appeared and looked at both hurting Masters in worry. "What happened? Was it those filthy mudbloods?"

"Nope," Sirius answered rolling to his feet.

"I bet it was muggles," Kreacher said paying little attention as he rubbed his chin in thought. "I'll fetch the baby traps and the hammers."

"It wasn't muggles," Sirius said louder, noticing Harry was picking splinters out of his blistered and bloody palm. "This would be the handiwork of the Dark Lord."

"The Dark Lord?" Kreacher said, shaking his head in dismay. "But why would he..."

"He was torturing a Black," Sirius explained.

"Well the Black probably deserved it," Kreacher retorted. "The Dark Lord is the greatest, most powerfulest, wonderfulest wizard ever."

Harry blinked reliving a few scary Dobby flashbacks.

Sirius frowned, "When I have to choose between family and the Dark Lord-

"You choose the Dark Lord," Kreacher answered for him.

"I wouldn't be a very good Lord *Black* if I did. Family comes first," Sirius corrected, "Dark Lord second."

"But he's the Dark Lord!"

"I think I might bump the Dark Lord a little lower than second," Harry commented wincing as he tried clenching a fist with his right hand. He ordered Kreacher, "Go get us a couple of pain relieving potions."

"If the Dark Lord wanted you hurt," Kreacher helplessly supplied. "Kreacher doesn't think you should be-"

"Oh for pete's sake, forget it," Harry said unwilling to deal with an immorally conflicted house elf when he was so close to passing out. "We need to check on Bellatrix anyway. We'll get them ourselves."

The quirky house elf was frowning and grumbling to himself, "Kreacher doesn't think Masters should be cheating out of punishments. Kreacher takes his punishments and Kreacher likes them."

Sirius helped Harry up and they slowly gimped their way up the stairs. "Do you need St. Mungo's?"

"Not this second," Harry said before noticing Sirius was moving as slowly as he was. "Do you?"

Sirius rubbed at his side. "I might have cracked a rib, but it's probably just bruised. I figure let's sleep on it and see how we feel in the morning."

Harry smiled blissfully at his godfather. "I was worried you were going to force me to a healer this instant like every other overbearing self-appointed parental influence in my life."

"You're a big boy, and I'm not that mature," Sirius admitted, clearly quite happy with both of those facts. They reached the top of the steps and stopped to take a breath. "Any guesses on what a baby trap is?"

"I'm quite sure we don't want to know," Harry said picturing a combination of a cage and bear trap.

The two Lord Blacks walked into the warded guest room and saw Bellatrix was still trembling in pain.

Harry and Sirius shared a worried look. Sirius grabbed a pair of pain relieving potions while Harry was staring at her Dark Mark. The skull was no longer present on her lower forearm. In its place was a shield with a sword and two stars flanked by a pair of greyhounds. Below the shield was a banner reading *Toujours Pur*. It was the Black family crest.

"Huh," Sirius said in slight surprise after drinking his potion and handing a dose to Harry.

Harry knocked the vial back and swallowed. "We might want to look into changing that motto."

Sirius nodded. "I say ditch the French and use pig Latin at the very least."

A sliver of movement behind the tattoo banner caught Harry's eye and he realized it was the tail of the snake.

"*Hey*," Harry hissed out in parseltongue.

The snake's head popped up from the unblemished skin just below the crest. "*You are... you are Master?*"

"*Yeah*," Harry replied. "*Now I am. And so is he.*"

The snake head turned towards Sirius and looked back at Harry. "*So he is.*"

"*Stop hurting her*," Harry hissed in command. "*I may talk to you later, but for now, do nothing to her. Okay?*"

"*That doesn't sound like fun*," the snake replied doubtfully. "*But as you command.*"

Harry saw the snake disappear back under the surface of her skin only to reappear above the top of the crest. It coiled up and tucked its head in to take a nap, locking into place atop the shield.

Bellatrix's body relaxed and was resting peacefully for the first time in days.

Harry looked at his watch and saw it was after two in the morning. "Alright. We can get ten hours of sleep but we've got to take her to the Wizengamot at one."

"Let's put off St. Mungo's until after the hearing," Sirius suggested. "It'll make us look better and give us a good reason to keep things brief."

"Good plan," Harry said after a loud yawn. "I guess you do have your uses."

"Please," Sirius chided. "If you weren't holding me back, that whole mess with Voldemort would have been over so much quicker."

"You're right," Harry agreed. "It would have been over much quicker."

"That's not what I meant," Sirius protested.

"Oh before I forget," Harry grinned stopping in front of his bedroom door. "Did you notice the cute and dainty way your wand whistles?"

"That's not-"

"Good night, Sirius," Harry said walking into his bedroom and closing the door.

"It's not a whistle!" Sirius insisted, yelling through Harry's door. "You hear me, Harry? It's a manly sound of success. Not a whistle!"

Harry stripped off all his clothes and couldn't even bother to clean off the dried blood. He fell into his bed and pulled the sheets up.

He heard Sirius' bedroom door close and a final muffled yell. "It's not a whistle!"

Harry allowed his worries to fade and happily wriggled into his pillow. His last conscious thought before sleep claimed him was '*I'm really gonna feel this one in the morning.*'

Author's Note: See? I didn't end with a cliffie this time. It happens on occasion. And I'll just allay any worries right now and say we've got a lot of fic to go still. We're maybe a little over half-way or so through this fic. I love hearing what you all think. Reviews make me want to write faster. It may be a cheap ploy but it's still true. Thanks for all the kind comments and constructive feedback.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"You bad Master!"

Harry winced as he woke up and hissed in pain when wincing aggravated his tender cheek. He groaned in general discomfort.

"Kreacher thought you were just different. Kreacher thought you were quirky. But Kreacher was wrong!"

"What?" Harry blearily asked, realizing there was a house elf standing on his chest.

"You bad Master! Bad, BAD!"

Harry opened his eyes and saw the house elf in question was holding up the Daily Prophet. The entire front page was a giant article entitled, "*Lords Black Outduel Lord Voldemort!*" with a smaller subheading '*Dark Lord retreats after gruesome broken neck.*' The picture showed Harry on his knees and the Dark Lord floating immobile as his head faced the wrong direction. The moving image had Sirius running into frame, then disappearing and running into frame again, in an eternal loop.

"Oh," Harry said watching the picture and remembering why he felt so crappy.

"No-good muggle-loving Master!" Kreacher spat. "Shame on you! Fooling Kreacher into thinking you're a good Master when Master knew Master was a bad Master. Bad!"

"Right," Harry said. "Get off me, Kreacher. That's an order."

Kreacher hopped down and stalked away angrily. "Filthy evil Masters hurting the Dark Lord. Tricking Kreacher into helping muggle-loving blood traitors."

"And leave the paper," Harry added. He was forced to quickly duck as the folded newspaper was thrown at his head and the elf disappeared down the hall.

Harry kicked his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. "Urh..." Harry groaned in pain. He drew his only remaining wand, the ash one with a unicorn hair and used his good hand to *scourgify* his clothes and sheets.

Harry walked slowly and deliberately towards his bathroom and turned on the tap. He splashed water on his face, gently rinsing the dried blood off his cheek, neck, and arms. He saw scrapes, scratches, and purple bruises all over his body. He exhaled tiredly and looked at himself in the mirror. "You look like crap," he told his reflection.

"And you're talking to a muggle mirror," the mirror snootily replied.

"I'm not stupid, you know," Harry said with a frown, before wincing in pain from frowning.

"Right," the mirror chided before standing up straighter, thrusting his hips forward, and mockingly staring Harry's eyes, "I'm a star. I'm a star. I'm a big bright shining star."

"Hey!" Harry indignantly scolded. "That's not an accurate reflection of me and you know it."

The mirror image rolled his eyes. "You're running late."

"Crap," Harry said glancing at the clock in his bedroom. He tossed on his clothes and grabbed the magical newspaper Kreacher had so kindly left behind.

Harry banged on Sirius' door and stuck his head in. "Time to wake up. We're supposed to be in front of the Wizengamot in three minutes."

"Ugh," Sirius grumbled. "Dammit Harry. You're an idiot."

"What'd I do now?"

"Why didn't you take me to St. Mungo's? I'm in pain here."

Harry pushed the door fully open. "You're a big boy. And you're not that smart."

“Oi!”

“Potions in Bella’s room,” Harry announced.

“Ugh,” Sirius replied.

“I’m taking you with us whether you’ve had your potions or not.”

“I hate you.”

Harry shook his head and turned towards Bella’s room. He added while leaving, “You made the front page.”

“Sweet,” Sirius happily called out before adding, “Ugh.”

Harry knocked on Bellatrix’s door. He waited a few seconds before walking in. “You awake?”

Bellatrix was lying in the exact same spot and just turned her head towards the door. “I wasn’t until I heard you say Wizengamot.”

“No pain, right?”

Bellatrix sat up looking around in confusion. “No, no pain. What did you do?”

“You haven’t looked at your arm, have you?”

Bellatrix made it a habit of pulling her sleeve down to cover the Dark Mark and for the most part pretended the mark wasn’t there. She slid her sleeve up and her eyes’ widened. “That’s impossible.”

Harry helped himself to a pain-relieving potion, then a headache potion, and finished with a pepper-up.

“How did... I mean... what did you do?”

Harry tossed her the folded up paper and instructed. “It’s an unofficial inquiry from the Wizengamot. The DMLE would have a warrant for your arrest if they could. And don’t answer anything we tell you not to. Be ready to go in a minute. We’ll get food afterwards.”

Bellatrix just listened as the young man ordered her around. She wasn't sure how she felt about Harry's attitude. She unfolded the paper and looked at the front page. Her heart clenched when she looked at the massive headline and photo. She'd feared the Dark Lord's retribution but the photo of him looking so broken, filled her with hope. She felt her body shudder in happiness that she had two Lords willing to help her and stand up for her. She could truly imagine getting another chance, free from the Dark Lord. Her fragile emotional state was beginning to crumble when she was rudely interrupted.

"Hey!" Sirius yelled, pulling the paper away from her. "Keep your tears off my picture, woman."

Bellatrix just turned to see the other Lord Black smiling at the newspaper.

"Where'd I go?" Sirius questioned. "Wait... what the? I'm not even in the picture half the time. What the hell kind of reporting is this? Dammit. Harry!"

Harry came back into the room carrying witch's robes covered in a sunflower pattern. "Don't blame me. They just happened to take a picture from an angle that makes you look fat."

"Makes me look *what*?"

"Here, put this on," Harry said tossing the robes to Bellatrix.

Bellatrix accepted the robes and looked at Harry doubtfully. "This isn't really my style."

"I'm aiming for innocent," Harry deadpanned. "I think we both know that's not gonna come off as your style."

Bellatrix shamefully got up and faced the wall while she changed into the robes, saying nothing more.

Harry was pleased to notice Sirius hadn't even noticed her brief moment of undress as he was carefully inspecting the newspaper photo.

"I don't look... *that* fat," Sirius complained. "It's a funny angle."

"We're late," Harry announced. He saw Bellatrix looked uncomfortable in the very feminine robes. "Give me your wand."

Bellatrix looked hesitant but handed it over.

"They won't allow you to have it in the session," Harry explained. "But if I've got it, they can't take it away. And I can give it to you, if we think you need it."

Harry snatched the paper from Sirius and grabbed onto Bellatrix. "You can read the paper when we get there. Might be a nice show of disrespect." Harry apparated to the atrium of the Ministry, pulling Bellatrix with him side-along.

Sirius appeared with a pop moments after. He leaned forward, clutching his side. "Dammit. We've gotta go to St. Mungo's after this."

Harry winced and agreed. The group of three checked in at the front desk and hurried down to courtroom ten.

Harry barged into the sealed courtroom, loudly announcing their presence. "Sorry, we're late. Sirius had pieces of Dark Lord in his hair."

The entire collected Wizengamot looked in surprise as the Lords Black stomped into the room like they owned it, while Bellatrix Black followed them dutifully. Seated in the three seats below Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore were Director Bones, Assistant Director Potter, and Croaker from the Department of Mysteries.

A simple sturdy table with three chairs was waiting in the middle. A pitcher of ice water and three cups were provided.

Harry made a show of hissing in pain, as he clutched his side. He held up his left hand and called the Sovereign Saber into existence. He twirled it twice as a pleasant reminder to the Wizengamot and then used it as a walking stick for the last few steps to the table.

“Are you Lords alright?” Albus Dumbledore asked, seeing they both looked pretty banged up.

Sirius nodded and took the seat on the far right. “We’re headed to a healer after this.”

“We could reschedule...” Albus offered ignoring the other members upset murmuring at Albus’ suggestion.

“No,” Harry insisted taking the seat on the left, gesturing for Bellatrix to take the center chair. “Let’s get this over with before my potions wear off and I get grumpy.”

“You wouldn’t like him when he’s grumpy,” Sirius warned, gulping down a glass of water and pouring himself a second.

“Come on Chief Warlock,” Harry said clapping his hands loudly. “Let’s get this inquisition going.”

Albus cleared his throat and answered. “Madame Bones will handle Miss Black’s questioning, but the events of last night have raised a few questions about both Lord Blacks as well.”

“Imagine that,” Sirius said, leaning back in his chair.

“Do you have any objections to answering some questions today?” Albus clarified.

Harry waved his hand in annoyance. “Wouldn’t you just issue another summons for another unofficial interrogation in a few days if we did?”

“Most likely,” Albus cheerfully agreed. He turned to the woman seated below him on the right. “Madame Bones?”

“Thank you,” Madame Bones replied at suddenly being thrust to the center of attention. “Bellatrix Black, do you understand that you are not being charged with anything at this time?”

Bellatrix glanced at Harry before nodding at Madame Bones.

“As this is a formal legal body, anything you say will be taken as the oath-sworn truth and inconsistencies could constitute a crime.”

Harry heard Sirius whining and handed him back the newspaper so he could read it. When Bellatrix looked at Harry again, he answered for her. “If you want her to answer the questions under veritaserum, she will. But only if we use an inverted bubble and all the questions are relayed through myself and Lord Black.”

Amelia glanced at her Assistant Director who was staring thoughtfully at the three Blacks. “That won’t be necessary. Miss Black, are you a Death Eater?”

She saw Harry nod and answered, “No.”

“Were you a Death Eater?”

Sirius had been holding up the newspaper and reading it in an obvious show of disrespect. He whipped it to the side and leaned around the paper to ask, “Is that a crime?”

“Being a Death Eater?” Madame Bones clarified.

“Or having been one in the past,” Harry added.

“No,” Amelia answered. “It’s not a crime.”

“But it subjects you to a more official questioning without witnesses and with veritaserum,” Harry stated.

“The laws on interrogating proven Death Eaters permit wartime tactics, yes,” Amelia agreed. “Miss Black, were you a Death Eater?”

Harry leaned over, loudly telling Bellatrix, “Don’t answer that question.”

“The Dark Mark is all the proof we need,” Assistant Director James Potter stated in irritation.

Sirius harrumphed and snapped his paper back up, ignoring this world’s Prongs.

“Well it’s a good thing she doesn’t have the Dark Mark then,” Harry retorted.

Sirius blew a victorious raspberry from behind his newspaper.

Amelia put her hand up to stop James and asked, “Healer Armstrong informed us she carried the Dark Mark.”

Bellatrix looked at Harry who shrugged at her. He replied, “Did you have a question in there?”

“Was he correct in his statement?” Amelia inquired.

Harry stopped Bellatrix again. “I hardly think we’d be capable of interpreting his statement to you when we weren’t there.”

Amelia paused before rewording, “Did you have the Dark Mark when Healer Armstrong treated you?”

Harry leaned over and whispered into Bellatrix’s ear. She looked at Harry curiously who just nodded in encouragement. Bellatrix leaned forward and softly answered, “I’m not here to talk about the past.”

A number of Wizengamot members were unsubtle in their annoyance, huffing and grumbling as loudly as Bellatrix had spoken.

Amelia could tell they were quickly going to run out of options. “So you’re admitting that you’re not a Death Eater now, but are unwilling to say whether you once were.”

“I’m not here to talk about the past,” Bellatrix said again upon Harry’s urging.

“And you don’t carry the Dark Mark now, and again, are unwilling to even say whether you ever did.”

Bellatrix nodded.

“Say it,” Harry whispered and nudged.

“I’m not here to talk about the past,” Bellatrix reiterated immediately.

"What are you here to talk about?" An annoyed member of the Wizengamot snapped.

Harry answered, "Bellatrix is here in cooperation with your request. She's openly stated she's not a Death Eater, and she doesn't carry the Dark Mark. Unless you have legal precedent demanding a response, she is free to choose whether to answer any given question or not."

"That is correct, Lord Black," Amelia said knowing they weren't going to get much of anything from this conversation. She had to try though. "Miss Black, without freely offering anything incriminating, could you tell us any details about your former associates? Their names for instance."

Bellatrix glanced at Harry and saw Sirius was still reading the paper. She leaned forward and said, "I'm not here to talk abo-

"Talk about the past," Amelia interrupted and finished for her. "Yeah. We heard that part. I think we're just wasting each other's time now. So if you wouldn't mind proving that you don't carry the Dark Mark..."

Bella showed off her forearm and the Black family crest tattooed on it.

James Potter walked on down and cast finishing charms, ensuring it wasn't just hidden or disillusioned. "*Toujours Pur*," He stated loudly. "How quaint."

Sirius flipped his paper back and interjected, "We're contemplating changing it to *ite-Bay e-May, itches-Bay*. What do you think?"

James looked at Sirius curiously, but without quite as much animosity as usual. He walked back up to sit by his boss, informing her, "It's their family crest, not the Dark Mark."

"Thank you Miss Black," Madame Bones said with a faked smile. "Your cooperation has been... *duly* noted."

"Great," Sirius called out, loudly folding up his paper. "Are we done now? Because my broken ribs are starting to itch." Sirius sniffed the air a couple times. "And I think I smell roasted almonds."

"I'm sure many people are very curious about the events of last night," Albus stated. "Would you like me to call for a healer while you answer our questions?"

Harry glanced over at Sirius who nodded. "Alright," Harry agreed. "And get us some sandwiches too."

Albus leaned back and whispered something to the woman standing behind him. She left the courtroom presumably to get a healer and some sandwiches.

"First off," Harry addressed. "I want to make one thing clear: last night was a family matter and a family matter only. We're not the Department of Magical Law Enforcement nor do we have any intentions of joining the Aurors. We consider the matter between us and Lord Voldemort closed. End of story."

Albus furrowed his brow. "You do not oppose the Dark Lord Voldemort?"

"Oppose?" Harry repeated and shook his head. "Not really. I think he believes there are wrongs in this society that need to be righted, and I'm certainly agreeable to that. That is not to say I approve of his alleged methods or philosophies. And if he is arrested and found guilty of any crimes, then I would fully support seeing justice prevail. So no, I guess I don't oppose the Dark Lord."

"He's going to come after you," James Potter insisted, "whether you oppose him or not."

"I'd rather he didn't," Harry offhandedly remarked. "We've already had one conflict with him that's been resolved. I hope not to have another."

An older wizard came briskly walking into the room, wearing the robes and carrying the tools of a healer. Harry pointed at Sirius indicating he should go first and the man began to fire diagnostic charms at Sirius.

“Are you saying if you were walking down the street and saw Death Eaters attacking innocents, you would do nothing?” Amelia doubtfully asked.

“Of course not,” Harry charmingly replied. “I would do what any decent person would do. I’d contact the authorities.”

“You would not step in?” Lord Peter Potter stood up and asked. “You are a powerful wizard.”

“A subjective claim but one that’s irrelevant. Protecting the magical people of this nation is the work of the Aurors. I’m no more an auror than most everyone else in this room. And while I’ve met a few with the competency of a whomping willow, I won’t belittle the work that they do by implying anyone could step in and do it.”

Amelia rolled her eyes at the pile Harry was shoveling.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Lord Potter sat down with a smile, shaking his head at Harry’s answer.

Most of the Wizengamot were surprised to see no retort from Harry but a look of matching amusement on his face.

“Your turn,” Sirius called out as the healer moved over towards Harry. A large plate of sandwiches had been brought in and Bellatrix and Sirius were both scarfing down lunch.

Harry let the healer examine him while the questioning continued.

“The matter of restitution needs to be addressed,” Albus stated.

“Prosti-what?” Sirius repeated with a mouthful of sandwich.

“Restitution, Lord Black,” Albus repeated somberly. “Your duel last night has left much damage in its wake. Seeing as how you failed to use the Lords’ arena for your duel, it falls to the participant Houses of the duel to cover the cost of repairs.”

“Fair enough,” Harry replied while the healer was focused intently on Harry’s damaged right hand. “We’re prepared to match every knut Lord Voldemort pays to cover the costs.”

A number of disgruntled murmurs filled the air before Sirius swallowed the bite in his mouth and said, “Actually, I was aiming to blast the Dark Lord into that teacup display. So I should probably donate to at least that particular relief effort.”

“Dammit,” Harry swore loudly after the healer gave him the news.

“What?”

“My bloody wand hand has seven hairline fractures. Any one of them could snap and pop right through the skin. He’s gotta vanish the bones and I’ve gotta regrow them.”

“Don’t trust him,” an old woman called out loudly. “He’s a dark wizard. This may all be a charade manufactured by the Dark Lord.”

“There’s the close-mindedness the Wizengamot is famous for,” Harry cheered. “Finally a voice for the voiceless incompetents.”

“I’m sorry,” Sirius asked with mock sincerity. “But who are you?”

“Hmph,” the woman huffed refusing to answer.

Albus interjected, “Madame Edgecombe’s family owns one of the buildings in Badgin Alley that sustained damages.”

“I make no secret of that,” Edgecombe snapped. “But it doesn’t change the fact that he’s a dark wizard.”

“Yeah well...” Sirius shrugged. “You’re a werewolf.”

Madame Edgecombe stiffened at the accusation. “I most certainly am not.”

“So? What does that matter?” Sirius asked in confusion. “I thought we were just making up random shit because we’re irritable from all the

sores on our crusty old vaginas.” Sirius finished while quite obviously scratching himself.

“Lord Black, please,” Amelia tiredly answered. “A little decorum while you mock and insult us would be appreciated.”

“Well I never...” Madame Edgecombe’s complexion was beginning to cycle between shades of anger and embarrassment. “I am making nothing up. He’s a *parseltongue*.”

“No, I’m *not*,” Harry said while trying to gesture with his hand. The healer had just finished vanishing the bones so his arm appeared to be flapping like a flesh-filled glove. “Nice work,” Harry commented towards the healer while wagging his hand.

“You deny that you’re a parseltongue?” she asked with a conniving smile. “That you weren’t seen hissing at the Dark Mark before your staged little duel?”

“I’m not a parseltongue,” Harry tiredly explained. “I’m a *parselmouth*. The language I can speak and understand is *parseltongue*. And if you’ve ever seen an anaconda you can understand why I sometimes get called a parselcrotch.”

“Lord Black!” Amelia snapped, looking more amused than scandalized.

“Too much?” Harry replied with a smile.

“We really don’t need to know that.”

Harry saw Dumbledore’s beard was twitching and hiding a smile. “I’m just floating it out there,” Harry said while leaning back in his seat. “You ladies make of it what you will. Well, except for you, Lord Burke.”

The man in question flushed in anger but refused to be baited.

The healer finished working on Harry and gave him a topical cream and a carefully measured dose of skele-gro.

"You are a disgrace," Edgecombe harshly announced while calmly sitting back down. "A disgrace to the Wizengamot, a disgrace to wizards everywhere, and a disgrace to your family."

"A disgrace to our family," Sirius repeated skeptically. "You just don't get it, do you?"

"You don't care," Edgecombe snobbishly retorted. "We get it."

"No, you don't," Sirius said. "It's not that we don't care, it's that we don't care about people like you."

"Some of it's that we don't care," Harry corrected. "But it's also fun to point and laugh at the truly retarded aspects of any form of government that includes us."

"I hardly think this is the appropriate time for this discussion," Albus interjected despite being curious what the Lords Black had to say.

"No, I think this is a fine time," Harry said. "Don't you think it's worth noting that had we lost last night's duel, there would be a Voldemort seat here on the Wizengamot? Does it not bother more people that an idiot punk kid could slip on a ring on a whim and suddenly have the ability to inadvertently entrench the Dark Lord into the primary legislative body?"

There were a number of shocked faces glancing around.

"Surprise," Harry mocked.

"You want to talk about a disgrace?" Sirius repeated. "I know more than a few of you flounce about your titles of Lord and Baron simply because you inherited them or your family ring chose you. But how many are concerned about a cousin you've only met a few times? I mean genuinely concerned about their health and well-being, even more than your own inflated sense of self worth?"

Harry was tempted to make fun of Sirius for caring more than he pretended.

“I’m not talking about the rationalization you delude yourself with that you’re only trying to make your family name respected.” Sirius paused and asked in a calm voice, “But how many of you would be willing to stand up to the Dark Lord for your family?”

Harry saw Bellatrix was slumping lower and lower in her chair. He tried not to enjoy her guilt too much. “Are we about done here?” Harry asked loudly.

“Are you in a hurry, Lord Black?” James answered watching him a bit suspiciously.

Harry gestured wildly letting his boneless hand flap back and forth in the air. “Heck no. It’s not like I did anything strenuous last night.” Harry’s floppy hand smacked himself in the cheek. “Oh wait... there was this one thing.”

“Speaking of last night,” Albus smoothly segued. “I found it particularly interesting that your wand and the Dark Lord’s combined to form the *Priori Incantatem* effect.”

Harry winced. “Noticed that, did you?”

Albus nodded seriously. “I also know you’re aware that Mr. Ollivander was obliviated and is missing a wand.”

“Before you go pointing that finger,” Sirius interjected. “May I remind you that we are the reason he’s even aware he was obliviated and lost a wand. We were as surprised as he was.”

Madame Bones just nodded, having taken Ollivander’s statement. “True, but it’s still curious that you were looking for that wand specifically. Seeing as though it appears you found that wand it also raises questions about where you got it from.”

“In case you missed it,” Sirius answered. “Harry’s wand went snap, crackle, and pop. And I don’t think Voldemort’s going to drop by and let you all check out his wand. For all your assumptions, they could be brother wands sharing a core of Veela ovaries.”

“Phoenix song was heard,” Amelia stated.

Sirius was about to retort before deflating rapidly. "Oh."

"Thanks for the help, Sirius," Harry said with a fake smile.

Sirius shrugged. "Well that's what you get for making fun of my disgrace observation."

"I didn't say anything," Harry argued.

Sirius shook his head in disagreement. "Your look said it all."

Harry resisted the urge to poke his pouting godfather in the eye. He turned towards the front of the Wizengamot. "I'm under too many other potions to take veritaserum, but I'll explain this under a truth spell."

Albus swiftly drew his wand. "Do you mind if someone other than Lord Black casts the spell on you?"

Harry glanced at Sirius and Bellatrix. "As long as you don't mind these two keeping their wands drawn."

Albus agreed and cast the intended spell on Harry. One lesser known advantage to casting the spell was the ability of the caster to feel when the spell is being resisted. That would give Albus a little more information on misleading truths or half-truths.

"Is it working?" Amelia asked turning towards Albus.

Albus nodded. "I believe so."

"Let's find out," Sirius grinned deviously. "Hey Harry, I know you saw Amy's knockers the other day. What did you think of them?"

Harry answered without pause. "They've held up better than I would've guessed. Which bodes well for the sake of Susan's breasts too."

Sirius turned towards Amelia who was keeping her head down. "Yeah, I'd say the truth spell is working."

"I would have to concur," Albus agreed. He saw a few people turn to him and quickly clarified, "That the spell is working."

"Lovely," Harry stated feeling the spell twinge at his sarcasm. "Okay, the thing with the wand is that I purchased it completely legally from... someone who I believe was the wandmaker. And I certainly never memory charmed Mr. Ollivander."

"Where did you get that wand?" Albus asked.

"I bought it from a wandmaker, and no, I'm not going to reveal the wandmaker's name."

Amelia inquired, "Do you not suspect the wandmaker may have acquired illegally? Or be guilty of attacking Mr. Ollivander?"

"For reasons I'm not going to share," Harry happily answered. "I can say that I am nearly certain the wandmaker who sold me that wand, was freely given the core and crafted it personally."

Harry didn't want to paint himself into a corner but got an idea. "I will add that I purchased my wand over a decade ago. Supposedly, there was a similar one at Ollivander's and that was why I asked Mr. Ollivander specifically for it."

Albus felt a twinge in the spell but knew everything Harry had said was the truth. He cancelled the spell and inclined his head. "Thank you for your cooperation, Lord Black."

"We done?" Sirius said, pushing himself to his feet.

"Not just yet," Albus said with an apologetic smile. "We were wondering what spell you used to finish the Dark Lord, and whether it was related to your unique form of defense in the duel."

"You don't need to know that," Sirius whined.

"I told you," Madame Edgecombe could be heard murmuring while shaking her head. "Dark. The whole family."

Harry offered, "It wasn't a spell I think anyone else could easily reproduce. But of course it was very evil, dark magic."

Sirius snorted at the deafening silence.

"Egads," Harry chided. "I've seen livelier crowds at death-day parties."

"Lord Black," Albus slowly began.

Harry put his hand up stopping Dumbledore. He looked at the Unspeakable. "Croaker, isn't it?"

Croaker nodded silently.

"You got some curse-breaking glasses?"

"I can get some," Croaker said, reaching into his inside pocket. There was a flash of magic and he pulled out a pair of rose-tinted glasses.

Harry waved him down. "I thought you might be willing to break down all of my evil, dark magic."

The pitcher of water lifted up off the table and refilled the three glasses in front of them.

"You see it?"

Croaker nodded, looking through the glasses. "Is there more to it than the two charms I see?"

Harry shook his head.

Croaker waved his hand through the glowing magical appendage, passing it through without resistance. He stuck his wand tip right into and whispered a spell that drained just a little magic from Harry's arm.

He whispered another spell analyzing the magic. "Remarkable."

"That's what the ladies tell me," Harry agreed.

Croaker ignored the sarcasm and asked, "So do you just exert more or less magic into either spell? This is an amazing amount of control."

Harry nodded and explained, "That's kind of the way it started, but at this point it's just second nature."

Croaker nodded looking at Harry's glowing appendage and saw several others emerge from his body as the pitcher and three glasses began to orbit them all. "I'm not surprised considering how the two have practically fused into one spell," Croaker added while looking only at the magic.

Dumbledore had been watching intently through his own charmed glasses as well.

"An explanation, please?" Amelia kindly ordered.

Harry set everything down and sucked his arms inward disappearing inside himself. He waved at Croaker to answer.

"It's nothing more than two sustained spells held in conjunction: one a banishing charm, the other a summoning charm," Croaker answered. "So you basically summoned the back of Voldemort's head while banishing the front, resulting in the violent twisting we all observed. How long have you been practicing those two spells?"

"Longer than anyone else I've heard of. But I think I'm predisposed to those two spells more than others. That's why I doubt anyone could easily reproduce the effect," Harry turned towards Albus. "And I think we've been patient enough. I'm exhausted and have the pain of skele-gro to look forward to instead of a nap. Was there anything else you wanted to know that can't wait?"

Albus glanced at Amelia who shook her head and nodded. "No, nothing else at this time. We thank you for your patience and cooperation, Lords Black, Miss Black."

Sirius jumped right up out of his seat, happy to go. Harry and Bellatrix followed him at a more sedate pace. By the time they caught up with Sirius, he was surrounded by a half dozen reporters and photographers.

“Did the Dark Lord-”

“It was purely a family matter,” Sirius interrupted as quills were whisking in notebooks. “Let me make this clear. We’re not opposed to the Dark Lord. We’re certainly not supporting him either. If he’s guilty of the crimes he’s accused of then I hope the Aurors can arrest him and put him on trial. But we’re not interested in doing the job of the DMLE.”

“He’s going to want you dead,” one man in a brown hat stated.

Sirius shrugged indifferent. “I suppose it’s possible he could be the type to hold a grudge, but as far as I’m concerned the matter between him and the Blacks is closed.”

“Don’t you feel you have a responsibility-”

“Yes,” Sirius interrupted. “As a Lord, I have a responsibility to my family. Of course ask anyone who knows me, and they’ll tell you I’m not a very responsible person.”

Harry caught Sirius’ eye and jerked his head towards the atrium.

Sirius nodded and gave them a chance to escape unnoticed. He addressed the reporters and said, “You know I’ve been called a muggle-lover, simply because I dislike muggles just as much as I dislike wizards. But when it comes to the measure of a wizard, I wonder how many would be willing to stand up to the Dark Lord, or the Minsitry. Or even Albus Dumbledore for that matter. The only thing I knew about Bellatrix was that she was a Black. And as her Lord, that’s enough. Anything else is a private family matter. Thank you.”

Sirius hurried after Harry and Bellatrix, quickly apparating back to Grimmauld Place.

“Dammit,” Sirius called out wondering where Harry and Bellatrix were. “You know what I just realized?”

“I’m in the muggle room,” Harry’s voice called back. “What did you realize?”

"I realized," Sirius ruefully admitted, "that 'Parselcrotch' is going to sell more shirts than any of my lines. Hell, I want a shirt that says 'Parselcrotch' on it. Maybe with a picture of a giant spitting hooded cobra."

"I'm sure Fred and George will have them on the shelves by the end of the day," Harry winced and clenched his eyes shut. "Let me start the sappy movie."

Sirius glanced at the screen as it came to life and turned back to Harry. "Why a sappy movie?"

Harry took a deep breath, patting himself on the arm with his good hand. "I can't sleep when I'm regrowing bones. And if my eyes water in irritation it won't be the work of some random bug I made up that flew in my eye."

"It was real," Sirius said for what felt like the hundredth time.

Harry ignored and continued. "It will be because I'm emotionally moved by this rich and dramatic tale. No other reason."

"You're gonna cry," Sirius laughed and pointed. He stopped and looked around, "Where's our resident psycho-bitch at?"

Harry pointed down the hall. "She's in her room. Kreacher was going to get her some food. I think he likes her more than us."

"We're going to need to figure something out for those two."

"I don't really trust either of them on their own, let alone together," Harry said. "But it's not like this side of Kreacher is terribly surprising."

Sirius nodded and silently watched some of the movie while fighting a smirk every time he heard Harry hissing softly in pain.

"Hey Harry?" Sirius said waiting for Harry to look over. "Why did you tell them so much about your wand and your freaky arm thing? We didn't have to answer."

"Why'd you care so much when I was called a disgrace?"

"I didn't care," Sirius explained. "I just wanted..."

"Stop looking for an answer," Harry said noticing Sirius was searching for an excuse. "I just was pointing out that you cared first."

"You answered their questions because you cared? And I didn't care by the way."

Harry paused the movie and explained. "I've had to deal with being looked at as both the poncy hero and as the next coming of the Dark Lord. And if I'm picking the lesser of two evils here, I don't want the headaches that come with them thinking of me as the next Dark Lord."

Sirius shook his head. "You cared."

"Besides," Harry added. "The best way to keep big secrets is to freely tell all the little ones and act like you have nothing to hide."

"Huh?"

"If you got ten questions about someone, and they eagerly and freely answer the first eight, then you're less likely to doubt or demand the answers to the last two."

"Oh, I get it," Sirius smiled. "You cared."

Harry ignored Sirius, turning back towards the movie and starting it up again.

Sirius stayed quiet for about a minute before asking "Hey Harry? Was your Voldemort a lot stronger?"

Harry paused the movie again and turned to his godfather curiously. "My Voldemort? Like he was a possession or a husband?"

"You know what I mean. Was he harder to defeat?"

Harry sighed, scratching his chin in thought. "Harder? Well... this Voldemort was a lot more composed and analytical. I guess this one

wasn't quite so psychotic really. But stronger?" Harry sighed, deep in thought. "I think this one could've outlasted our old one."

"Really?" Sirius asked.

Harry nodded. "Did you see how many spells he cast? That kind of volume's ridiculous. And he still had more in him."

"We won," Sirius weakly added. "Stop trying to scare me."

"You asked."

Sirius kicked his feet up and laid back on the couch. "I hope he's hurting." He glanced over at Harry. "Or at least crying as much as you are, you big baby."

"I'm not above vanishing your pelvic bone."

Sirius frowned in confusion. "I don't think there's any real bone in that."

Harry sighed and started the movie again.

An ear-piercing shriek echoed around the stone chamber, sustained for ten agonizing seconds.

Voldemort stopped and panted as he caught his breath. He lay flat on his back on the altar in the middle of an old ritual room. He didn't care how immature and undignified he may have appeared. There were moments when his anger was better served yelling at the top of his magically enhanced lungs.

He had undergone enough rituals that his body was in the process of healing itself from injuries that would have easily killed lesser men. Already his mouth and jaw were working, though he still could not turn his head, nor could he feel anything below his neck.

Unfortunately for the Dark Lord, the healing was moving at a glacial pace. Fully healing his spine could take years, and there was no way to know when he might regain control of his limbs. But he knew of

another way. Only the alternative ensured his magic would be drained and chaotic for weeks. After conceding that weeks would be preferable to relying on his limited ritual-created ability, he'd called for Rabastan Lestrangle. And ordered him to go out and find a muggle as close to exactly the Dark Lord's size as possible.

Now he was just waiting here for Rabastan to return, with all the time in the world to think over how things had gone so wrong.

Just two days ago the Dark Lord had been torturing a new recruit, satisfied in the knowledge that it was being felt by the deserter, Bellatrix Black, when he was crudely interrupted by one of his faithful with an urgent message.

He'd heard many such tales of the Lords Black already and he hoped to gain their allegiance. When he arrived and saw his downed Death Eaters, he hoped they were putting on a show of their talents. When the one named Harry conversed with the Dark Mark in parseltongue, he hoped he had found a loyal kindred spirit.

But the Dark Lord had been foolish to hold onto hope.

He would humbly admit that they played him masterfully. First through capturing his attention long enough to humor them, then by tempting him with something useful to offer, and finally by inciting his anger until he had acted irrationally.

Voldemort at first wanted to claim their dueling skills were no match for him. Sirius would have fit right in with the inner circle, and Harry seemed too concerned with defense, showing only modest skills in offense. But the Dark Lord also realized it was that assessment of Harry that had permitted the young man's close approach. And he wasn't going to forget the smile that flashed on Harry's face just before the Dark Lord got turned into a captive of his own body.

Harry had been playing nice, waiting until he was close enough to strike.

Voldemort was confident they couldn't have killed him. He had too many protections against that. But when his neck broke, and he couldn't move his body, he had felt helpless. And that scared him.

How easily he could have been captured then, and even now he was still susceptible.

The Dark Lord had been pleased to discover his magic was getting restless trapped inside his body and could now be focused in ways it never had before. It had only taken a burst of anger to explode the door to this room when he'd first portkeyed back here.

He had possessed one of the recruits when he had to address his faithful, but even that healthy young body couldn't sustain him and he was back here in his own flesh prison within a matter of hours.

The Dark Lord shrieked once more at the top of his lungs. He was angry. But he was disappointed in himself even more.

"You okay, Master?" the younger Goyle asked, sticking his head into the ritual room.

Voldemort closed his eyes and concentrated. He was rewarded by the sound of a fleshy pop and a kneecap came spinning across the floor, clacking against the altar the Dark Lord rested on. He happily chuckled to himself at the sound of Goyle screaming in pain, unable to even touch his bloodied leg.

He heard an obviously more intelligent recruit stun young Goyle and drag his body out from the doorway. The Dark Lord sighed again wondering how hard finding a muggle his size would be.

Returning to his musings he briefly wondered if the Lords Black were a manipulation of his unknown nemesis. Most often the Dark Lord referred to him as 'that fucker' considering how little was known of him. Numerous plans over the years had been foiled by that fucker, many of them in the early stages. He had first suspected there was a spy amongst his inner circle, but Voldemort had re-established each of their loyalties personally.

All Voldemort knew was that fucker seemed to be a complete enigma. He was operating from the shadows exclusively for almost two decades, as no one seemed to know anything about that fucker. The rumor that it was Neville Longbottom the Dark Lord found laughable. The mere idea that a child could match up to the Heir of Slytherin was

so unfathomable that it didn't even anger the Dark Lord. It amused him.

He knew that fucker wasn't a kid. He'd dueled with him on dozens of occasions. Never for more than a minute or two before one or the other fled the scene. And that fucker wasn't shy about blowing shit up. The Dark Lord knew that fucker had an elegance and style similar to his own. And a ruthlessness that scared every one of his Death Eaters.

The two Lord Blacks possessed little style and more blunt force trauma in their execution. That was one part of Harry that not even that fucker could have faked. A tired clumsiness to his actions, that neither the Dark Lord nor that fucker would ever willingly show.

Voldemort sighed thinking about the myriad of fronts he was forced to constantly fend off, whether it was that fucker, Dumbledore and his flaming little Order, the increasingly competent Aurors, or now the Lords Black.

He had read the Prophet and heard reports from other sources that the article was completely accurate. The Lords Black wanted nothing to do with him and really were only interested in protecting Bellatrix Black's soul. They weren't going to assist the Ministry, and given their attitudes in the Wizengamot sessions weren't going to fall in line with Dumbledore any time soon. They weren't even gloating over their very public victory.

The Dark Lord honestly found it a bit disturbing. Because he really had no idea what to make of it. Could they genuinely believe he'd just let it go and consider the matter closed as they pretended to? Were they really deluding themselves into thinking they might not get any retribution from him? Voldemort was truly lost on what to deduce from their behavior.

If anything, the Dark Lord figured, their unpredictability was about all you could count on. And from what Voldemort could tell, it seemed to focus on Harry more than it did Sirius. His behavior and skills were just one revelation after the next, from his gift for the serpent tongue to the scar on his forehead to his magical arms. And to willingly and

publicly divulge the secret of his arms? That's what puzzled Voldemort the most.

He was trying to gain an understanding of the two Lord Blacks. His musings led him back to his brief attempt at Legilimency. Neither had any noticeable protection though Harry had immediately located him and ejected him forcefully enough to snap his hold on both of them. But it was not before he had gleaned a single thought from each of their heads. Two more pieces of the puzzle that formed this unique pair of Lord Blacks.

From Harry's mind he had discovered that Sirius was Harry's godfather. A relationship that was even more important when combined with what he had extracted from Sirius' head: Harry was the son of Sirius' best friend.

That pointed strongly to the conclusion that they weren't both born Blacks. When he considered that at the time Sirius Black was healing in St. Mungo's he was not yet Lord Black, it appeared that Harry had received the title first and yet Harry was the one less likely to have been born a Black.

For Harry to receive the Lordship, he would likely have inherited it from his godfather, indicating... that Sirius had died? The Dark Lord could tell he was getting somewhere and continued to brainstorm. He began to think that Harry may have traveled back in time after having become Lord Black, and then altered the timeline and saved his godfather's life.

Therefore he was already Lord Black, and he could assist Sirius in gaining the same title. The Dark Lord was trying to imagine just how powerful the magic to accomplish something like that would be when he froze in recognition.

He couldn't believe he had been so oblivious. It had been twenty-five years since he'd last encountered a Sirius Black with a godson named Harry. He knew without a doubt that he had killed those two, but the situations were damning in the similarities.

He started to try and imagine how Harry could have splintered the timeline that far into the past when he suddenly caught on to the fact

that he didn't have to go back at all. These weren't the Sirius and Harry of this timeline. These two came from another one entirely. Sirius came first, and that's how Harry received the Lordship in their world. Then Harry came after Sirius and helped Sirius gain the Lordship in this one. They really did just arrive in the last few months.

Voldemort then connected that Lord Harry Black was a different Harry Potter, and a viable subject of his prophecy. That made things far more complicated.

Yet again, the Dark Lord screamed in frustration.

"I've got one, Master!" Rabastan Lestrangle announced levitating an awake and frightened muggle into the chamber.

"It's about bloody time," Voldemort snarled. "Show him to me."

Rabastan directed the man to hover over the Dark Lord so that he could get a look at him. "He may look a little taller, but that's just the hair."

Voldemort looked up at the man blocking his light. "He'll have to do. Strip him. And lay him on top of me. Face up."

Voldemort's robes fell open revealing his own nude body, and the petrified man was set down right on top of the Dark Lord.

"I've got him," Voldemort ordered, seizing control of the spell with only his mind. "Leave us. And seal the door behind you."

"Yes Master," Rabastan happily agreed, eager to get out of there. He felt the locks on the door latch before he could turn them himself.

"First things first," Voldemort said, extending his tongue to lick the back of the man's head. "Let's break that silencing spell."

The man's frightened gasps and yelps were made audible and he shouted at simply having the ability to do so.

"Go ahead and scream," Voldemort hissed at him, pooling his magic at the surfaces where their bodies met. "It inspires me."

The screams echoed throughout the room and all the halls in the building. Many Death Eaters were relishing in the haunting sounds, while their weaker-willed brethren were intimidated by them.

About twelve hours later the inner circle was assembled waiting outside the ritual room door.

The Dark Lord opened the door with his hand and stood there leaning against the door frame. His skin was white but looked shiny and new. Behind him on the altar was what appeared to be a skin sack filled with fluid and tissue that only vaguely resembled the muggle.

Voldemort was panting from the effort but was very pleased to be mobile once again. "I want to know everything there is to know about the Lord Blacks. No one is to touch them, understood?"

The inner circle all nodded their heads obediently, completely masking their own opinions.

While trying to block out the pain, Voldemort had been doing a lot more thinking on the presence of this Harry Potter, if he was in fact Harry Potter. The more he considered it, the more sense it made to the Dark Lord. But he wasn't going to rule out that fucker either. He briefly entertained thoughts of how revealing their secret could be used against them, or to blackmail them, before remembering the prophecy. Which would mean their secret getting out would probably hurt him more than either of them.

"The Lord Blacks are off limits until I say so. But if you find the deserter," Voldemort clenched his teeth demanding, "Make an example of her."

He dismissed his inner circle and began to calmly walk back to his own chambers, hiding the pain he was still in. He realized that if Harry and Sirius really did just arrive in this timeline, then their ignorance of the differences between worlds could be used against them.

And then, when the time is right and they had run out of surprises to hide behind, he would savor killing Harry Potter again.

Sirius Black though would be denied the mercy of joining his godson in death. No, the Dark Lord thought with a grim smile, Sirius' pain would come from living.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Son of a bitch!" Sirius yelled after stubbing his toe. He looked down and saw an empty dirty cauldron had been set down in front of his bedroom door. "Harry? Did you put this here?"

Kreacher's not so quiet cackling was heard coming from the down the hall.

"You wretched little hatemonger," Sirius swore shaking his leg, trying to ignore the pain in his toe. "Get back here."

"Stupid bad Master wasn't looking where he was going," Kreacher mumbled to himself ignoring the fact that he was walking towards Sirius. "Stupid stupid Master."

"Listen up, you little ingrate," Sirius ordered. "We were protecting a pureblood, Bellatrix, from a mudblood, Tom Riddle. That's right! The Dark Lord's pappy was a muggle."

"Kreacher knows about the Dark Lord," Kreacher mumbled in irritation. "Everyone knows about the Dark Lord. But not everyone knows about Kreacher's stupid Masters. Oh no. Stupid masters have *lots* of secrets to keep."

"Sirius," Harry yawned as he walked out of his bedroom. "Do you have to pick a fight with a house elf every morning?"

"He tried to break my foot," Sirius defended, pointing down at Kreacher.

"Kreacher forgot where Kreacher put one of the cauldrons to clean. Accidents happen. Even to stupid Masters the Dark Lord is going to eviscerate. Accidents happen." Kreacher muttered, not looking up at either of them.

"Are you sure we can't kill him?" Sirius questioned. "Are you really, really sure?"

"You're not that guy," Harry chided.

"I don't know," Sirius argued, shaking off the pain in his big toe. "I think I can change. I hear good things about evil."

"Stupid Masters getting stupider," Kreacher muttered and lazily stomping away disrespectfully. "Bringing muggle filth into the noble and most ancient House of Black."

Harry narrowed his eyes as Kreacher began to walk away. He turned to Sirius, "But I think it might be time we started punishing the racist little wanker."

"Kreacher, come here!" Sirius happily called out. He asked Harry, "Want see who kick him further? We can start from the top of the stairs. You get a bonus kick if he hits the umbrella stand."

"No, no," Harry said motioning with his hand. "That's not the sort of punishment I had in mind."

Kreacher had reluctantly walked back up to Harry and Sirius, mumbling, "Blood traitors don't even know how to punish right."

"Kreacher," Harry ordered. "That sort of language will no longer be tolerated."

Kreacher gnashed his teeth before smirking cheekily and explaining, "Sorry Master. Kreacher only speaks English."

Sirius looked at Harry and offered, "I'll let you kick first."

Harry shook his head. "That's the kind of negative treatment he expects. No, Kreacher, you are going to gently massage my feet while I read to you notable facts about muggle history."

"What?" Kreacher said looking at Harry in confusion.

"Oh," Sirius said thinking deviously. "You know, I've got some underwear that needs to be cleaned..."

"Perhaps by hand?" Harry suggested. "Of course no magic should be used at all with delicates."

Sirius rubbed his chin in thought. "I was thinking tongue-washing actually."

Kreacher was looking at them fearfully. "But... but... not even mudbloods-"

"That's another thing," Harry interjected. "We're not going stand for those slurs anymore. Every time you use words like mudblood, muggle filth, blood traitor, anything like that..." Harry paused, thinking up something appropriate. "For every derogatory implication, you have to make a child smile."

Kreacher paled while Sirius was clearly impressed.

Harry continued. "We'll transfigure you into a midget and take you to a muggle park. If we hear you say mudblood three times, that's three kids you're going to make smile and laugh."

Kreacher whispered in horror. "You wouldn't..."

"You think I'm bluffing?" Harry said staring the elf down.

"But..." Kreacher argued. "The young ones... they have all the diseases."

"That's one," Harry said raising a finger. "Looks like we're going to the park tomorrow. You want to go for two?"

"No!" Kreacher shrieked. "Kreacher will be good."

Sirius smiled at Harry. "Well that was a quick improvement in attitude. I figured you'd have to obliviate him."

Kreacher turned to Harry in surprise. "You know how to memory charm house elves?"

"*Obliviate*," Harry quickly cast on the elf. "Sirius, don't even mention that around him."

Kreacher was just standing there with a glassy eyed stare.

Sirius gently nudged the elf to make sure he was okay.

Kreacher jerked into awareness and said, "Please don't make Kreacher be nice to mud-...ggles."

Sirius shrugged happily. "I guess the memory charm works."

"*Obliviate*," Harry immediately recast on Kreacher. He pointed his finger at Sirius, "That's one for you, buddy!"

"Me?" Sirius argued. "Why do I... Actually, I don't mind making a kid or two smile."

"Good," Harry said. "Because you're still going to be transfigured into a midget. And Remus and Tonks are invited and encouraged to bring cameras."

Sirius paled and insisted. "Hey now, that's not fair."

"Hello?" A loud call came from down the hall. "Anyone there?"

"Mistress," Kreacher said just as he popped away.

Harry and Sirius had both turned in the direction of the call, having recognized Bellatrix's voice. Harry looked at his godfather, "You ready to get her story?"

Sirius nodded. "Yeah. I'm sick of worrying about whose on bitch-sitting duty."

"It feels wrong keeping her locked in a room," Harry agreed.

"I know what you mean," Sirius said with a nod. "It's just not right to keep a grown woman locked in a room, *unless* you're using her for sex."

"No Sirius," Harry said with a roll of his eyes. "That would feel wrong too."

The two of them went to Bellatrix's door and knocked.

"Come in," she replied as the two Lord Blacks walked into her room. "Am I going to be a prisoner here forever?"

Sirius grabbed the chair by her desk while Harry pulled out the recliner he kept in his shrunken trunk. "Nope," Harry answered plopping down, ignoring the strange look from Bellatrix. "It's time we figured out what to do with you."

Bellatrix sat on the edge of her bed. "I know you both don't like me, and I can never repay what you've done for me—"

"You don't owe us anything other than loyalty to the family," Sirius interjected.

"And before we decide anything," Harry said. "You need to give us some answers."

Bellatrix swallowed but earnestly offered, "What do you want to know?"

Sirius looked at Harry, allowing him to take the lead.

"Well," Harry said. "You could start with why you joined the Death Eaters and why you wanted out."

Bellatrix looked at Harry in confusion. "Why I joined? I don't know where you two fit into the Black family considering you certainly weren't on any family tapestry I've ever seen, but we were all raised to be servants of the Dark Lord. Asking why I joined is like asking why I'm a witch."

"Does that mean you toe the party line on blood status?" Harry inquired. "Kill the unworthy, enslave the unpure, yada, yada, yada."

"I honestly don't care," Bellatrix shrugged indifferently. "If you want me to start wearing muggle clothes that say 'Hug a Muggle,' I will. If you want me to start hunting down the half-bloods dirtying proper wizarding society, I know some pretty good curses. But I've never been a dedicated true believer like my brother-in-law."

"Malfoy will believe anything that says he's better than everyone else," Sirius retorted. "It's probably why he'll be wrong his entire life."

Bellatrix smiled lightly. "You won't be hearing me defend Lucius anytime soon."

"Yes well," Harry chided. "As useless tools go, Lucius Malfoy is a half-inch strap-on."

Sirius shook his head. "You're probably giving him a quarter-inch too much credit."

"Alright then," Harry said attempting to get back on topic. "So your heart wasn't really in the Death Eating business. That's not exactly enough reason to openly and actively defy them. You know they're going to want you dead. So why'd you want out?"

Bellatrix took a moment to look at her Lords before uncertainly replying, "I don't know what you want me to say."

"Did something happen?" Harry asked. "Was there some life-changing event that opened your eyes to the atrocities of the world and jaded you on everything you previously held up as unwavering truth?"

"Did they rape you, beat you, kill your favorite pet muggle?" Sirius asked. "Anything?"

"Nah," Bellatrix shook her head. "Sorry. Nothing like that. I wasn't punished anymore than any other Death Eater. I never tried to draw attention to myself or work my way up the chain of command. I killed when I supposed to kill, I tortured when I was supposed to torture. Though I suppose I did try to hide how much fun those parts can be."

Harry wasn't sure but he thought he saw her eyes twinkling.

"No one tried to force you into marriage?" Sirius asked curiously.

Bellatrix smirked. "There aren't many witches of my pedigree still single at my age, but I never let anyone touch me that I didn't want to."

"And if you did want them to touch you?" Sirius flirtatiously retorted.

Bellatrix sat up prouder, straightening her shoulders and thrusting her chest out. "I am a Black and can be very alluring when I want to be."

Harry glanced over at Sirius and sighed.

"Oww!" Sirius shrieked slapping a hand over each eye. "Both eyes, Harry! Really? Was that necessary?"

Harry ignored his godfather and turned back to Bellatrix. "I still don't get why you'd want to go from laying low avoiding attention to Dark Lord enemy number... four or five maybe."

Bellatrix took a deep breath and shyly admitted, "I guess it was seeing my nephew, Draco."

"Ahh," Harry nodded. "I'd want to get the hell away too."

Sirius snickered in approval.

"Umm, actually," Bellatrix corrected, "he was more a reminder that I can't put off having a child forever."

"See? Nothing wrong with family," Sirius jumped in before thinking of Draco. "Well, usually."

Harry ignored Sirius while looking at Bellatrix as if she were crazy, which was entirely possible. "Seeing Draco made you want kids?"

Bellatrix nodded.

"What the hell kind of kid do you want? A transsexual quintaped?"

"No!" Bellatrix quickly corrected. "I don't want a kid *like* Draco. Good god, no. Draco's wife Pansy is expecting, which means my sister is about to be a grandmother."

Harry whistled in relief. "Okay, that makes a *lot* more sense."

"But I don't want my kid to grow up a Death Eater the way I did," Bellatrix explained. "I've been waiting for the Dark Lord to conquer Britain or be destroyed. Two things I'm not so sure will ever happen. And then you guys came along..."

Harry nodded and finished for her, “offering you a way out from the Death Eaters.”

“Well, yeah, that too,” Bellatrix said looking up in surprise. “But I was also hoping one of you would let me carry and raise your heir.”

Harry froze in place and now knew for sure she was completely insane in this world too.

Sirius who had been in the process of checking her out once again, stopped suddenly. He got to his feet saying, “I’m out of here,” and calmly left the room.

“You could be as active or absent in our child’s life as you like,” Bellatrix pleaded as Sirius walked away. “I just want to be a mother. I don’t even care if it’s a squib!”

“You,” Harry began but couldn’t say anything further. “You...” he tried and failed again.

“I can be your consort, your mistress, or just the mother to your child,” Bellatrix begged. “I’m not picky.”

“Stop,” Harry said unable to look up. “Just... stop.”

“I realize you both hate me for some reason,” Bellatrix tried. “So I don’t mind if you want to get rough with me. Just don’t hurt the womb.”

Harry got up and left the room sighing. “Fucking nutty purebloods.”

Bellatrix was again alone, still locked in her room. “That could have gone better,” she said to no one in particular.

She fell backwards onto her bed and stared up at the ceiling. After about five minutes of quiet contemplation, she called out, “Hey guys?”

When there was no response, she tried again, “My Lords?”

“Harry?” She yelled. “Sirius?” She forlornly continued, “Anyone?”

Harry opened her door and asked, “What?”

"I won't bring up the subject you obviously don't want to talk about," Bellatrix assured him. "But can I at least leave this room? I promise not to go anywhere without permission or an escort, I'm just sick of-"

"Yeah," Harry interrupted her. He grabbed a hold of the anchor stones on her doorway and brought the warding magic crashing down. "Come on. We still need to talk and we can do that in the kitchen."

Bellatrix followed Harry out of her room. They walked past the muggle room, where Sirius was focused intently on the large television screen in front of him.

"You take your reproductive organs and just keep moving," Sirius harshly ordered while hitting buttons on the remote, not even glancing towards her.

Bellatrix hurried after Harry down the stairs, quietly commenting, "I can't do anything right by you guys, can I?"

Harry briefly looked back at her before continuing to the kitchen. "You want something to drink?"

"Whatever you're drinking is fine," Bellatrix replied. She walked over towards the window and saw it was a sunny day. "You mind talking outside?"

Harry only then realized she'd gone from cursed, to the hospital, to tortured, to locked in a room, to the courtroom, and back to locked in her room. "Yeah," Harry said pouring her a large glass of firewhiskey and one for himself. "Outside works for me."

Harry scourgified a bench in the enclosed back yard and sat down while Bellatrix just meandered through the dried leaves and tall grass. Harry began, "Let me just make this part clear first. Neither I nor Sirius will be providing you an heir so don't ask. But as you said, you are a Black and I suspect there will be no shortage of volunteers to helping you out with that."

"I'd like it to be someone you approve of," Bellatrix responded while staring up into the sky. She turned to look at Harry. "Because my child will be a Black and it'd be nice if you liked him or her."

“Nothing like a clinical screening process of potential sperm donors to start the day,” Harry said sipping his firewhiskey. “Okay. We can talk about baby batter later. But I need some background information from you.”

Bellatrix sighed. “You want to know all the people I’ve killed?”

Harry winced. “No. Well, maybe I’m a little curious but... no. Yeah... no. No. I don’t want to know.”

“What then?”

“In case you’ve not caught on,” Harry explained. “Sirius and I aren’t originally from around here. And I need to know what sort of Death Eaters are going to be out for your blood, what resources your former Master has at his command, pretty much everything the Wizengamot and DMLE wanted to know.”

Bellatrix nodded, expecting as much. “Should I start anywhere in particular?”

Harry sat his glass of firewhiskey down. “Why hasn’t Voldemort been more successful? Is the Ministry that on top of things? Or the Order of the Phoenix?”

“The Ministry’s clueless,” Bellatrix explained. “And Dumbledore’s group gets more credit than they deserve. No, the Dark Lord’s nemesis is a wizard working from the shadows.”

“Neville Longbottom?” Harry suggested.

Bellatrix shrugged. “No one knows. We always referred to him as that fucker.”

“That fucker?” Harry repeated with a chuckle. “I suppose that’s catchier than You-Know-Who.”

“Who?”

“Never mind,” Harry said. “So who is that fucker? Or what do you know about him?”

“That’s just it,” Bellatrix said. “Hardly anything is known about that fucker. He just appears when he wants to and then takes down just about everyone.”

“Everyone?”

“Not all at once or anything. He doesn’t take on twenty wizards but when he shows up, he usually quickly asserts control of the situation. Stunning, disabling, and sometimes crippling some very good duelers.”

“He doesn’t kill?”

“Not often,” Bellatrix replied. “Everyone knows he could, and he has killed a few that have irked him, but I’d guess most of the time it’s just not worth killing to him.”

“Do the Death Eaters fear him?”

Bellatrix nodded seriously. “The Dark Lord fears him, though he’d never admit it. I only saw him really go all out once. The Dark Lord, along Sidney Nott, Andreas Rollins, and the Gibson twins, summoned a demon. The summoning circle drained them all, and there were several of us on hand to protect them after the calling ritual.

“The demon split both Gibsons in two before anyone realized what was happening. Then that fucker appeared and just *happened* to have a lasso capable of holding a demon long enough for him to behead it.”

Harry whistled, thankful he never had to do that. “And that required him going all out?”

“Beheading a demon will kill it,” Bellatrix said, “but not right away. And they never go quietly. The Dark Lord was injured. Nott and Rollins were killed, but that fucker was the only one keeping up with the headless demon.”

“So he was helping out?” Harry asked curiously.

Bellatrix shook her head. "The Dark Lord knew what he was doing when he summoned that thing. But see that's just it. That fucker seems better informed than any Death Eater of what the Dark Lord's plans are."

Harry resisted the urge to rub his curse scar thinking about how he had picked up on some of his Voldemort's plans. "And Voldemort doesn't know why or how?"

Bellatrix shrugged. "The first few years after that fucker started appearing, the Dark Lord was furious. Then he started acting more carefully and obsessed over figuring out the unknown wizard. He tried to contact him, even put some hidden messages into the *Daily Prophet*. Now that fucker is just the albatross he can't shake."

"Twenty years and he knows nothing about this guy?"

"It hasn't been quite that long," Bellatrix corrected. "And it's not like the Dark Lord would tell me what he knows about that fucker."

Harry was sitting there wondering if the mystery wizard could have been hit by a Killing Curse and gained a link to the Dark Lord. "Is there anything you can tell me about him?"

"Well, I don't know if he still suspects this, but for a while the Dark Lord was convinced that fucker was hoping to take his place and become a new Dark Lord."

Harry didn't even try to hide his sigh. "You think that fucker will care about your shift in loyalties?"

Bellatrix shook her head. "I doubt it. He's only ever seemed to care about the Dark Lord, but as far as I know they've never really gotten into a serious duel. Not like you two did with him."

Harry started nursing his firewhiskey again in an effort to hide the smile on his face. Harry gave up trying to devise a clever way to inquire and just outright asked, "Do you know if the Dark Lord has ever hit that fucker with a Killing Curse?"

Bellatrix looked at Harry oddly. "I hardly think that's something he'd keep to himself. Why? Do you have reason to believe he's dead?"

"Forget it," Harry said quickly changing the subject. "Is the Dark Lord based out of Little Hangleton?"

Bellatrix jerked her head up and nodded. "That's where one of the most heavily warded safe houses is. How did *you* know that?"

"Lucky guess," Harry retorted. "And he probably keeps Nagini close by when he's there?"

Bellatrix furrowed her brow. "Who's Nagini?"

"The Dark Lord's familiar?" Harry offered. "Large venomous snake?"

She slowly shook her head. "As far as I know, he doesn't have a familiar. I've seen him talk to snakes, but not kept as pets."

"Huh," Harry said, having not expected that.

"Although," Bellatrix said. "There are rumors that he's got a monster at his command in the forest behind the Riddle house."

"A monster?"

Bellatrix shrugged. "He expressly forbade everyone from going into that forest. A couple Death Eaters supposedly have, but they might have just disappeared or been quietly killed. I've heard sounds in there, sounds of something big, but it is a forest so..."

"You don't think," Harry was musing out loud and stopped himself from saying too much.

"I don't think what?" Bellatrix asked.

Harry was saved from answering as a crack announced the arrival of Remus Lupin.

"Harry!" Remus greeted. "You're okay." He turned and saw the woman standing near the large gnarled tree. "And you're not alone."

"It hasn't been that long since I last saw you, Moony," Harry greeted.

"Yes, well," Remus held his tongue in front of the former Death Eater. "You've caused quite a stir since then."

"Remus," Harry stood up to give a proper introduction. "This is Bellatrix Black. Bellatrix, this is Remus Lupin."

"We've met," Remus guardedly stated. "Though last time I saw you, I believe you were wearing a mask."

Bellatrix resisted the urge to snap back. She snootily retorted, "Do not presume that every Death Eater you've crossed has been me, werewolf."

"Bellatrix," Harry said softly as one of his magical arms reached out and grabbed her chin, turning her head to look straight at him. "You should know I grew up with a pretty crappy excuse for a family. So just be aware, that the lengths I'll go to, to protect family, are nothing compared to what I'll do to defend my friends. Are we clear?"

Bellatrix swallowed the lump in her throat as the photo of the broken Dark Lord flashed in her head. "Yes, my Lord. Forgive me. I'm still... relearning my place in the family."

She felt Harry's hand release her and she turned towards Remus. "I don't think an apology for my past will mean anything to you, Remus. But my loyalty is to the family now. And you raised a Black, so you have my respect."

"Hmm," Remus murmured while glancing at Harry. "There may be hope for you yet, Bellatrix. I still remember a witch at Hogwarts who was one of the few Slytherins who could take a joke."

"That's right," Harry realized. "You two went to school together."

Remus nodded and asked, "Is Sirius around?"

"He was pouting in the muggle room last I saw," Harry waved towards the back door. "The wards are back to normal, so you can go on in."

Remus nodded curtly towards Bellatrix and walked into the back entrance.

"The half-breed!" Kreacher shouted as Remus walked in.

"That's two!" Harry yelled loudly, staring at the elf.

Kreacher let out a frightened 'eep' and popped away.

Harry turned back and saw Bellatrix looked meek and subservient again.

"It's weird to hear him ask about Sirius," Bellatrix quietly explained, "when it's a different Sirius entirely."

Harry was again able to avoid a risky topic of conversation, this time by the arrival of an owl. It flew down and perched on the edge of the bench, sticking out its leg towards Harry.

He cast the usual oculamagi spell over his eyes and saw there was nothing magical about the letter at all. He untied it from the owl, who settled in to wait patiently for a reply. He saw the letter was addressed to Lord Harry Black and Lord Sirius Black. When he opened it, he didn't recognize the feminine hand-writing and skipped down to the bottom to see who it was from.

Harry's eyes widened and he couldn't avoid the emotional response at seeing so casual a signature of Lily Potter. "Fuck."

"Who's it from?" Bellatrix asked curiously, keeping her distance so as not to intrude.

Harry looked up at Bellatrix and back down at the letter, feeling as though his life was a surreal experiment. He quickly read through the missive and answered, "It's an invitation to dinner from the Potters."

Bellatrix weakly laughed. "Speak of the devil."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry said looking at Bellatrix accusingly.

Bellatrix held up her hands indicating she was implying nothing derogatory. "First Lupin, then I was thinking about Sirius Black, and now Potter too?" she explained. She looked off into space as old memories surfaced. "You know I was there that night."

Harry looked up curiously. "What?"

"The Potter house on Halloween, '81," Bellatrix explained. She saw Harry's look and quickly added, "I didn't attack my cousin or anything. There were a couple dozen of us waiting in the wings, but the Dark Lord wanted to do the job personally. I saw him kill Sirius and retrieve the baby Potter. He severed Sirius' skull from his spine and cleaned it off while the baby just kept crying."

Harry was just gaped at her, unable to believe what he was hearing.

"I'm sorry," Bellatrix said noticing Harry's expression. "You don't want to hear this."

"No," Harry immediately answered. "I do. I just... so what did he do with... the baby? He's not still alive, is he?" Harry was momentarily wondering about that fucker.

"No," Bellatrix blurted out before hesitating. She sighed and continued. "I left before it was done, but he held Sirius' skull in one hand, while he cradled the baby in his arm. He used his free hand then to... well, it was some sort of ritual. Whatever it was, it was ancient dark magic. Nothing I recognized. Just before I left the Potter kid finally stopped screaming."

"I later heard that he'd drained the life from the area, turning the nearest tree into a skeleton and staining the ground permanently," Bellatrix admitted with an unconcerned shrug. "I reckon he wanted to make an example of a potential subject of his prophecy. Of course, I didn't know about the prophecy then. Hmm," Bellatrix mused. "You know, that might have been when my disinterest in the lifestyle really started."

Harry was sitting there clenching the letter in one hand and listening to her in horror. He didn't need to know this. He really didn't need to know that Sirius' skull was a Horcrux. And he really didn't need to

know it was made from the cold-blooded murder of his infant alter ego.

Bellatrix saw Harry looked a bit rattled by her tale and added, "Yeah, you may just want to take a pass on that dinner. The Dark Lord's ritual effects are probably still there, whatever it was he did."

Harry just listened to her calm tone and was clueless how to respond to this. He stared at her without blinking for the better part of a minute before agreeing, "Yeah. No dinner." He knocked back the rest of his firewhiskey and stood up banishing all the negative thoughts from his mind. He looked at his watch and saw it was still well before midday. "I'm going to go get drunk." He stopped and turned back, "Do me a favor, and never mention this to Sirius."

Bellatrix nodded in acceptance and watched the typically more composed of her two Lords walk away. She looked over at the owl still perched on the bench. "It may take him a little while to reply to that letter."

The owl turned to look at her and hooted softly having figured that out on its own.

"Know any good jokes?"

The owl tilted its head, wondering if it was safe around the strange woman.

"Or perhaps a powerful wizard willing to impregnate me?"

The owl had made its decision and flew off to wait in the tree where it would be safer.

Bellatrix sighed. "Yeah, I get that a lot."

Remus sat his beer down, looking at Harry incredulously. "How could you not have known? You saw Sirius leave with her identical twin sister just ten minutes earlier."

Sirius was laughing heartily while his godson embarrassingly picked at the label on his beer bottle.

"It's not like I hadn't been drinking or anything," Harry explained. "And in my defense, Sirius' girl was wearing a lot of whorish makeup."

"Hey," Sirius snapped. He paused and scratched his chin in thought. "I do like the whorish makeup, don't I?"

"Padfoot," Remus reminded. "You've always had a clown fetish."

Sirius choked on his beer. "You swore to never tell!"

"Different Remus, different Sirius," Remus said with a smirk, finishing off his beer. He stood up and announced, "This time it *is* my turn."

"No, *last* round was your turn," Sirius grumbled.

Remus ignored him, asking, "You guys want the same?"

Harry and Sirius both nodded and took a look around the muggle bar, taking notice of the single women.

"You're not worried about leaving her alone?" Sirius asked, knowing Harry knew exactly who he was talking about.

Harry shook his head. "She was going in disguise to her storage space. She packed up and stashed everything important before she showed up at Grimmauld Place. And besides, I gave her some homework to do."

Sirius finished off the last of his beer and set the empty bottle down. "Homework?"

Harry smiled. "She's making a list of every Death Eater, including all known homes, maps, protections, wards, house elves, the works."

Sirius scoffed. "Won't she find that a bit suspicious?"

"Maybe," Harry admitted. "But I was very insistent that if she gets captured and kidnapped, we're going to need to know the layouts of

Death Eaters' homes. Keeping that information to herself is just an unnecessary risk."

"Right," Sirius chuckled.

"And of course we also need to know the locations of valuables for leverage or ransom," Harry added. He thought it over in his head and realized that even Goyle would have been suspicious. "Besides it saves us a lot of ground work and she's sworn loyalty."

"Malfoy?"

Harry shook his head. "She's not keyed in."

"Damn," Sirius swore as Remus returned with three more beers.

"Are we discussing your new houseguest?" Remus asked.

"We were," Harry said accepting the beer from Remus. "But let's not anymore. How's work going, Moony?"

"Same old, same old," Remus said. "Another upgrade was forced on our customers so we've been swamped with calls. I guess the head office was worried that some people were beginning to like our products."

"Tsk, tsk," Sirius chided. "Your talents are wasted at that place. Don't you think it's time you looked into getting a more productive job?"

"Sirius?" Remus said in between sips of his beer. "You're going to lecture me on my vocation? *You?*"

"Someone has to," Sirius retorted.

"My job doesn't come with a significant risk of a prison sentence," Remus argued. "I think career-wise I'm in a little better place than you right now."

Harry jumped in. "I hate to say it, but I agree with Padfoot."

"Thank you," Sirius cheered. "Face it, Moony. You don't have to financially support Tonks, your home is paid for, any emergencies

come up and we've got your back. And you tell me, which does more good for the world: annoying muggles on the phone or re-appropriating a certain group's resources?"

Remus raised a curious eyebrow. "You want me to join you two in your illicit affairs?"

Sirius' eyes widened and Harry snapped, "He didn't mean it like that, Sirius. I know, the moustache confuses me too sometimes."

"Hey," Remus frowned. "Cheap shot."

"And no," Harry continued. "That's not what we're saying."

"Yeah," Sirius agreed. "We thought of it first. We got dibs."

"Actually," Harry corrected. "I was more thinking that we're nobility and can weasel our way out of most things, but with your affliction you'd get raked across the coals if we were ever caught in any sort of compromising situation."

"Not to mention it's fundamentally immoral and wrong," Remus added.

"Details," Harry said waving off Remus' argument. "What Sirius and I are saying though is that you have more options and freedom now to find something a bit more fulfilling."

Remus tipped back his beer, mulling their words over. He admitted, "Tonks has been getting on my case about this too."

"Smart girl, that one," Harry agreed.

"And a wildcat in the," Sirius paused at Remus' warning growl, "...battlefield."

"Don't even go there," Remus said staring at Sirius. "Pack instincts got nothing on parental ones."

"Ugh," Harry said slouching in his seat. "That reminds me."

Sirius quickly asked, "Of the time you and Tonks-OWW!" Sirius grabbed his eye.

“Don’t go there, Sirius,” Harry said earning an approving nod from Remus. “You know the rules. If Tonks is around then you can joke about the number of times my dipstick has checked her oil, but not with only Daddy here.”

“I don’t even get that muggle reference and I’m disgusted,” Remus said rubbing his temples.

“Well on my motorcycle,” Sirius began to explain using his hands to demonstrate. “The dipstick goes in the-”

“Stop,” Remus said and pleading with Harry. “What were you reminded of?”

Harry frowned. “Your mention of parental instincts reminded me that we received a letter.”

“Oh you got that?” Remus said happily.

“What letter?” Sirius asked.

“It was from... Lily Potter,” Harry said. “Inviting us to dinner at Godric’s Hollow.”

“School’s in session so it’ll have to be a weekend,” Remus explained. “And as long as it’s not a full moon I’ll be there, and of course, Tonks, and Lord Potter.”

“We’re not going,” Harry firmly said.

“Oh thank Merlin,” Sirius exclaimed in relief.

“What? No,” Remus frowned. “You have to.”

Harry shook his head. “I really should just keep my distance from her as much as possible.”

“But it’ll be so much fun,” Remus pleaded. “And you know James will be uncomfortable.”

“That is true,” Sirius realized beginning to agree.

Harry looked at his godfather. "If you want, you can go."

"If I'm going, you're going," Sirius insisted.

"I'm not going," Harry repeated. "You saw what happened at St. Mungo's. That'd just raise way too many questions I'd rather never answer."

"Never?" Remus asked worriedly. "You're never going to tell them who you really are?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe eventually but there are... *more* issues than you realize."

"There always are with you," Sirius agreed. "Wait, what issues?"

"Ones I'd prefer never to think about," Harry quietly admitted. "And are unavoidable every time I'm near her."

"You're really not going to dinner?" Remus asked.

"Really," Harry assured him, "No."

"Guess we're not going," Sirius echoed. "Now if you gentlemen will excuse me, I see a delightfully delectable derriere in dire and desperate need of deep... care and affection."

Harry followed Sirius' line of sight and saw a pair of attractive women at the bar, one of whom was caught looking right at his godfather before turning away.

Remus and Harry were left alone at the table while Sirius went and turned on the charm. Remus smiled. "Once a scamp, always a scamp, huh?"

"Yup," Harry agreed, while keeping an eye on Sirius.

"So what sort of career change would you suggest?" Remus asked.

"No idea," Harry asked. "What do you want to do?"

“My options are limited by my condition,” Remus explained. “It’s not the sort of thing you can hide, needing every full moon off. And not too many people would hire me for that reason.”

Harry suddenly had a bright idea and wondered why he’d not considered it. “You like pranks, right?”

“Professional pranking is not a job,” Remus answered. “As Sirius was heartbroken to discover in his fifth year meeting with Professor McGonagall.”

“Naw,” Harry said. “I meant because I have it on good authority that Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes is going to be expanding significantly. Bigger store in Diagon Alley and a second branch in Hogsmeade.”

Remus perked up. “Weasleys are good people. Fred and George help out the Order. You think they’d be willing to work around full moons?”

Harry nodded. “I suspect when you tell them your nickname they’ll be more than happy to.”

“My nickname?”

Harry smiled. “If they grew up anything like the twins I used to know, their livelihood during school was in large part thanks to a certain map they nicked from Filch’s office.”

“Really?” Remus said thinking it over.

“It doesn’t hurt that me and Sirius are their new financial backers,” Harry added. “Tell you what, you’re not working tomorrow, right?”

Remus shook his head.

“I need to go to Diagon Alley and buy an animagus potion.” Harry suggested, “We’ll drop by, visit the twins, see if you have any interest in working with them, or they have any positions for you and go from there. If you want, you can crash at our place and we’ll go in the morning.”

"Yeah," Remus agreed. "Sounds like a plan."

"Hang on," Harry said looking towards Sirius. "Come with me, Remus. Sirius needs backup."

"What?" Remus said jumping to his feet. "Is it Death Eaters?"

"Settle down!" Harry harshly whispered. "And no, it's not Death Eaters. It's a Betty with an overprotective friend."

Remus looked at Harry incredulously.

"You need to get laid, Moony," Harry said as he began to walk over towards the bar. Sirius was on a stool talking to a pretty girl on his left. To the girl's left was the overprotective friend, and to that friend's left was a guy sitting alone, seemingly there just to drink. The seat next to the man was empty, and Harry went straight for it.

Remus sighed at Harry's statement and followed after him. "Tonks has been on my case about that too."

"Like I said," Harry repeated. "Smart girl." Harry took the only empty stool while Remus was left standing awkwardly.

"Maybe I should-"

"Don't go anywhere," Harry ordered him. "This will take just a second."

"There aren't any more stools," Remus was whispering to Harry. Harry was just smirking up at Remus while sending an invisible magical arm out.

The overprotective female friend yelped and turned to the unknown man in between her and Harry. She slapped him soundly across the face. "You keep your hands off me, you bastard!"

The confused man was rubbing his rapidly reddening cheek. "But... I didn't-"

Harry had stood up and placed a warning hand on the man's shoulder. "I think you've had enough."

"Seriously," the man pleaded. "I didn't do-"

"If you want," Harry said while keeping a tight grip on the man. "There's an empty table right over there where you won't bother this young lady."

The man knocked back the rest of his drink and got up. "Forget it. I'm out of here." He stumbled his way out the door.

Harry sat back on his own stool and waved towards the empty spot. "Take a seat, Remus, before another drunken lout starts groping this fine damsel."

Remus was biting his tongue, knowing full well what had happened and sat down. He saw the other girl by Sirius was looking their way and Sirius was behind her flashing a bright grin and a thumbs up. Remus felt Harry poking him repeatedly in the side and finally turned to the woman next to him, asking, "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Sure," she agreed, leaving her friend alone to deal with Sirius' undoubtedly classless advances.

Harry kept one eye on Sirius and Remus, while looking around the bar. He heard the two older Marauders and the two women getting on splendidly when he spotted an attractive brunette standing near the door. "If you'll excuse me a moment," Harry said getting up and going over to talk to her.

Remus and Sirius nodded at Harry, while the two women obliviously continued on their conversations. Remus had barely time to order a drink before Harry was back again.

"Gentlemen," Harry said to Sirius and Remus. "I'm going to head on home. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

The two women giggled ferociously, leaving Harry to think Sirius and Remus might be making a break for it pretty soon.

“Night, Harry,” Sirius said wincing at the sound of the women’s laughter.

Remus saw Harry throw his arm over the brunette and leave the bar, amazed at how quickly the young man worked.

Sirius and Remus continued to chat up the two women who it seemed loved the sound of their own voices. Remus had taken Sirius’ advice and was hoping more alcohol would make them sound better.

It wasn’t working.

Another twenty minutes and two drinks later the women said they had to leave. Given the option both Sirius and Remus declined the offers of walking them home choosing to stay for another drink instead.

Remus could tell he was quite drunk, and given the volume of Sirius’ voice when he talked, he was too. But neither could believe their luck when a gorgeous pair of twins sat down and joined them in drinking. They were having a far better time, or perhaps, Remus mused, they were just drunk enough to not know any better. Approximately an hour later, the twins, Sirius, and Remus were all totally inebriated and began walking back to Grimmauld Place.

Remus was in slightly better shape than Sirius, or at least than Sirius was acting, because the elder Lord Black had a twin under each arm, helping him up the stairs. It was only after they both helped Sirius back towards his master bedroom that Remus realized the twins were a package deal and they were going with Sirius.

Sirius came back out into the hallway where Remus was standing in disappointed surprise. “Sorry Moony, but... *twins!*”

“It’s fine,” Remus said.

“It’s better than fine,” Sirius cheered, glancing back and noticing they were both making themselves at home in his bed.

“I’m just gonna crash in one of the guest rooms,” Remus assured him, noticing he was slurring his words and feeling exhaustion replace his nervous excitement.

“Yeah, of course,” Sirius said. “Just don’t...” Sirius stopped when his drunken mind came to a truly brilliant conclusion, realizing he could have his twins and maybe get Remus laid after all. “Third door on the right. That’s the cleanest guest room in the whole house.”

“Thanks Padfoot. Have fun,” Remus tiredly agreed and walked down the hall. He opened the door and didn’t even feel like turning on the light. He closed the door behind him, stripped out of his clothes, and crawled into the large inviting bed. He idly noticed that it did smell quite nice and was surprisingly warm and soft.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Again?" Remus mumbled in his half-conscious and half-drunken state. "You're insatiable."

"Well," Bellatrix said mounting the werewolf for the third time that early morning. "I figure the more shots fired, the better the odds at least one will hit the bullseye."

"I could've sworn I heard you hitting the bullseye a couple times there," Remus mumbled in peaceful enjoyment as his body fell into familiar rhythmic gyrations.

"I don't know if it's true or not," Bellatrix explained as she got comfortable and arched her back, keeping a steady determined pace. "But I heard that orgasms increase the chances of conception. So don't mind my diddling."

Remus' eyes snapped wide open. He looked up and saw Bellatrix's attractive nude form bouncing above him. "Oh god."

He looked down and saw where their hips were joined, creating regular fleshy thwacking sounds. "Oh *god*."

"Already?" Bellatrix asked, increasing her pace.

Remus slapped his hands over his face. "This is a nightmare. It can't hurt me. It's not real. I just need to focus on waking up. Wake up... Wake up now... Wake up now..."

Bellatrix sighed, but hadn't stopped bouncing up and down on Remus. "I don't know why everybody hates me so much around here."

"You're raping me, *right now*," Remus snapped, resting his hands on her thighs.

"Don't be so dramatic," Bellatrix chided, shifting her weight forward so she could look him in the eye. All the while her rhythmic bouncing continued. "Besides, do you even want me to stop 'raping' you?"

Remus was meeting her bounces with thrusts of his own. He frowned uncertainly. "I'm a little conflicted on that point."

Bellatrix was grateful she could count on most men to act like the idiots they really were. "You don't feel very conflicted."

"I'm a complex man."

"You feel thick. And meaty."

Remus kept bouncing her in place. "Well... thank you."

Bellatrix nodded civilly. "You're welco-"

"No!" Remus yelled, beginning to come to his senses. "No, no!"

"Dammit," Bellatrix cursed, trying to keep going. "I thought your brain might've been catching up in the race for blood flow."

"Get off of me," Remus said lifting Bellatrix bodily as he hurriedly wiggled away from her and out of the bed. He looked around and realized he was naked, not to mention visibly saluting a superior officer. He grabbed a pillow to temporarily cover himself. "What the hell is going on?"

Bellatrix sensed his confusion. "Were you bewitched?"

"Ohh," Remus said slapping one hand to his forehead while the other held his pillow in place. "Headache. Hangover headache."

"I can think of one good way to lessen the pressure in your head by easing the blood flow."

"No!" Remus snapped back at her. He once again was distracted by the slight sheen of sweat covering her very firm and nude body. "Well, maybe..." Remus shook his head and banged on the side of it. "No! Tell me what's going on."

Bellatrix looked at him curiously. "You really don't-"

Remus eyes' widened in remembrance. "And what the fudge were you saying about *conception*?"

Bellatrix was about to scold him for interrupting but was distracted. "*Fudge?* Did you just say fu-"

"You're after my sperm!" Remus gasped and pointed.

Bellatrix gestured airily. "Well, that's kind of the-"

"Hang on," Remus interrupted again. "That doesn't make any sense."

Bellatrix was getting irritated. "Will you stop interrupt-"

"I remember before the first time, you cast charms on your happy place. I assumed they were contraceptive charms," Remus said scratching his head as he was beginning to piece together the reality of this morning.

"Oh so now you rememb-"

"But why would you cast contraceptive charms?" Remus repeated and stopped. He seemed almost hesitant to muse aloud, "Unless you were harvesting my sperm for... later?"

Bellatrix didn't say a word, denying him the opportunity of interrupting her again.

"Don't you have anything to say?"

Bellatrix huffed. "I was under the impression my Lords had selected a father for my child and you were here to fulfill that obligation."

Remus was still feeling the effects of the previous evening's alcohol and when he processed what Bellatrix said, he assumed he was having some sort of hallucination. He stumbled and stuttered his way through a few unfinished thoughts. He decided to disregard her last statement and got back to the simpler matter at hand. "Why are you even in my room?"

Bellatrix looked around the room. "This is my room. You crawled into my bed while I was asleep. When I awoke, you were poking me in the back with that thing."

Remus' breathing was labored, processing his last conscious thoughts before waking up in a sex dream, which turned out to be a lot of sex and not much dream. "But Sirius said," Remus stopped and he jumped back shouting, "SIRIUS! I'm going to kill him."

Bellatrix was leaning against the headboard and had pulled her knees up. "So we're really not going to give it another shot?"

"No!" Remus yelled at her. "I..." He trailed off as he watched Bellatrix slide down the bed, lay on her back and pull her legs up.

Bellatrix was rocking back and forth on her back. She remembered something about utilizing gravity and relaxed muscles to improve the odds when she saw Remus staring at her. "Just trying to help the process along." She saw he wasn't moving but was staring at her naked body. She pointed towards her crotch, "Feel free to jump in, if you want."

Remus could feel a twinge of desire igniting in his stomach. He turned, bending over quickly and vomited all over the floor.

"Now that's just rude," Bellatrix said, still doing her unusual rocking in hopes it would help with conception.

Remus was panting, not even caring that he was spitting on the floor, in an effort to get the taste of bile out of his mouth.

"If you want me to wear a glamour, just say so," Bellatrix offered. "Until I'm pregnant, consider me your penis sheath. Penis glove? Penis holster? Penis pincushion? I think I like sound of sheath best."

Remus was wiping the mess from his mouth and asked, "What did you cast then, if not contraceptive charms?"

"I assumed you'd recognize it," Bellatrix explained from her odd position. "I don't care if it's a boy or a girl, but I'd rather not a werewolf if it can be helped, so that was just a bit of magic ensuring it'd be a daughter."

Remus just stared at her in shock.

"You know," Bellatrix tried to fill the uncomfortable silence, "because your curse is only ever passed on to sons."

"I know that," Remus snapped and exasperatedly scolded, "But that's a dark spell."

Bellatrix resumed her rocking motion. "That I only needed because you're a dark creature."

Remus started to get dressed unable to maintain a conversation with a nude Bellatrix rolling around like a turtle flipped over.

He glanced at her after pulling his shirt over his head. Bellatrix paused a moment and hopefully pointed towards her exposed nether regions, silently inviting him again.

Remus shook his head and left the room as quick as he could. He walked down to Sirius' bedroom and banged hard on the door. "Get out here, Padfoot!"

His sensitive werewolf hearing picked up on movement muffled by a weakened silencing charm, before the door was pulled open, by a half-asleep Sirius Black. "Moony?"

Remus didn't hesitate for a moment or hold back any of his enhanced strength as he landed a sharp right cross to Sirius' temple.

The punch connected with a loud crack and Sirius crumpled to the floor. His mouth was open in silent scream that slowly trickled into a whining, "...aaaAAHHH!"

Sirius was clutching his head and looked up at Remus.

Remus waited a beat and then started kicking Sirius in the leg. "*What*," he kicked, "*the hell*," kicked again, "*were*," kicked twice, "*you*," kicked the back of his thigh, "*thinking?*" He kicked him a little harder as Sirius rolled over exposing asscrack above his pants.

"Harry!" Sirius' voice came out extremely high-pitched. "Help!"

"Harry's not going help y-"

"What's up?" Harry asked perfectly alert, standing right behind Remus.

Remus jumped having not even heard the other Lord Black approach. "Dammit Harry," he said clutching his heart. "Help me kick this idiot."

"I've got company!" Sirius harshly whispered, from his curled fetal position on the floor.

"You smell like puke, Moony. Didn't remember a hangover spell last night, did you?" Harry said distracting him from kicking Sirius. He was looking straight at Remus, waiting on an answer while helping Sirius to his feet.

Remus sniffed the air and winced at his own acrid odor before remembering what he was doing. "I can't believe you did that to me," Remus whispered angrily staring at Sirius.

"You needed to get laid," Sirius argued, in between noticing how bad his own mouth tasted and rubbing his sore jaw. "It was a win-win situation."

"Not with... *her*," Remus spat out.

Bellatrix had slipped on a robe and was tying the belt, standing about ten feet back of them. "Why does everybody hate me?"

"You," Harry said pointing at Remus. He turned to Bellatrix and finished, "And you?"

Bellatrix nodded rubbing her belly hopefully.

"That's bloody brilliant," Harry cheered, before yelping and grabbing his own shin. "OWW! Dammit Moony!"

"She already used dark magic on our rapebaby!"

Harry had to bite his tongue from suggesting that rapebaby made a good name but the mention of dark magic intrigued him. He looked at Bellatrix. "Gender forcing?"

Bellatrix nodded.

Harry leaned in towards Remus and whispered, "That's what the other you and Tonks did too."

Remus looked back at Harry in disgust. "Why would you tell me that? *Why?*"

Harry opened his mouth to reply and shut it. "I don't think you'd like any of the answers I'd give to that question." He saw Remus frowning and shrugged sheepishly. "It wouldn't be necessary if you weren't already a dark creature."

"That's exactly what I said," Bellatrix helpfully added, while massaging her lower stomach.

"Great minds skullfuck alike," Sirius mumbled under his breath.

"Is everything okay?" came a feminine voice from inside Sirius' bedroom. She and her twin were wearing identical bathrobes as they joined the crowd in the hallway.

"No!" Harry shouted pointing at the pair. "What are you... How... But..."

"Twins," Sirius exclaimed happily throwing an arm around each girl. "I got them both this time, so no surprises in the morning."

"No," Harry said shaking his head in disbelief.

The girl in Harry's room chose this moment to come out, wrapped in only a robe. "Did I just hear..." She locked eyes with the two women standing behind Sirius and gasped in surprise. "Tracey? Stacey?"

The two identical looking sisters squeaked in surprise at the sight of their also identical looking sister. "Lacey!"

Sirius looked at the girl behind Harry and then back at the two sisters he had assumed were only twins next to him. He whipped his head back and forth, crying out, "Why does this keep happening to us?"

Harry looked back at Lacey and could tell there was no doubt Tracey, Stacey, and Lacey were identical triplets. He turned back and scolded his godfather, "Why did you pick up two girls who looked just like Lacey?"

Sirius was about to defend himself before he fully realized the situation. He started to chuckle victoriously. "I got two, you got one. I win."

Stacey and Tracey were just staring at their sister incredulously. Stacey broke the silence declaring, "But Lacey, you... you're a *lesbian*!"

Harry felt the young woman inch closer to him for safety.

Tracey scoffed as incredulous as her sister. "And you're a virgin!"

Lacey was blushing as she tried to hide behind Harry, just barely peering over his shoulder. She softly admitted, "A day ago, both of those would have been true."

Harry tried to fight it but his eyes were twinkling.

"Fine," Sirius sighed and admitted, "You win."

"Of course I do," Harry said, thumping Sirius on the shoulder.

"What the fudge is going on here?" Remus snapped, feeling his fury dissipating at the strangeness of the morning and getting really angry that he was less angry.

"Fudge?" Stacey asked curiously. She turned to Tracey, "Does he realize he said fudge?"

"Hey guys," Tonks' voice carried from down the stairs. "Have you seen my dad? I don't think he ever made it home last night."

"Oh fuck me," Remus grumbled quietly to himself.

"Dibs!" Bellatrix called out.

"No!" Remus said pointing forcefully.

“Dad? Is that you?” Tonks called out as she hurried up the rest of the steps. “There you are,” she announced taking notice of the crowd forming. “Umm... good morning Harry, Sirius, triplets I don’t know.”

“Ooh triplets,” Bellatrix imagined, keeping a hand over her womb.

“My second favorite death eating aunt,” Tonks said glancing coldly at Bellatrix.

“Hang on,” Tracey asked. “She’s your aunt?”

Tonks and Bellatrix both nodded.

“But Sirius,” She turned to the man wrapped around her and her sister. “Last night you said Remus was going to sleep with her?”

“You what?” Tonks asked her rapidly paling adoptive father.

“Hold on, it’s not what you think,” Remus tried to explain.

Bellatrix helpfully added, “I just want a baby.”

“For breakfast?” Tonks asked in confusion.

Bellatrix stomped her foot in a childish show of frustration. “Why does everyone think I’m some kind of monster?”

“Maybe because you’re a murderer,” Tonks stated unequivocally.

The three triplet sisters were all looking at Bellatrix. She made no attempt to deny it, admitting, “We all have our quirks.” She ignored them for only a moment, before arguing, “Oh stop it. You were a lesbian virgin and you two clearly have issues.”

Tracey, Stacey, and Lacey all harrumphed in unison.

Remus saw Tonks looking at him in disappointment. He could feel her judging him and he had to resist the impulse to kick Sirius more.

“In fairness,” Harry felt like making a half-hearted attempt to mollify the situation. “You were saying he needed to get laid.”

Tonks looked at Harry with a frown. "That was so he'd be less irritable. Not because I wanted a little brother."

"If it happens, it'll be a sister for you," Bellatrix assured her.

"Oh a sister?" Tonks repeated. "Well that's okay then, Dad. Why don't you go fuck my murderous aunt a little bit more?"

"Maybe I will," Remus retorted, thinking Tonks was being harsher than necessary.

"Really?" Bellatrix asked.

"No," Remus told her. "Not really."

Bellatrix flashed open her robe.

Remus gulped. "Okay there's a chance."

"Listen Tonks," Harry interjected. "I'm not trying to make excuses for anybody, no matter if they were drunk or desperate enough to sleep with Bellatrix. But really, this is all Sirius' fault." Harry finished pointing both thumbs over his shoulder at his godfather.

"What?" Sirius yelped. "My fault? I'm not the one who came up with *Harry's Secret Plan to Get Bellatrix Knocked Up*, now am I?"

"Don't you pin this on me," Harry turned to glare at Sirius.

Sirius was fighting back laughter and could see Harry was as amused as he was. "You're the one who told me to get Moony plastered and send him to her room."

"Why you little-" Harry exclaimed as he slammed Sirius to the ground and began to strangle him.

"It was Harry's idea!" Sirius called out as soon as Harry let up.

Harry went back to mock strangling Sirius while using magical arms to pinch him all over.

Sirius was yelping and flopping around like a fish, pinned underneath Harry. "Help! Kreacher!"

Kreacher appeared with a loud pop and grumbled, "Yes, Master?"

Tracey and Stacey who had huddled over by Lacey both shrieked loudly at the appearance of the house elf. They saw no one else present was surprised and began to scream even louder.

"Oh right," Harry said. "Muggles."

"Oops," Sirius added, while still pinned down.

Harry stunned the three triplets quickly, silencing their piercing shrieks. "You should be more careful," Harry said helping Sirius up.

"Enh," Sirius mumbled indecisively. "They were probably going to have to be taken care of anyway."

"I can help with the bodies," Bellatrix offered, finally seeing an opportunity to contribute to the family.

"Oh brilliant," Tonks said rubbing her forehead. "Expanding this family is a wonderful idea."

Sirius and Harry exchanged a pitying look. Sirius explained to Bellatrix, "We're just gonna memory charm them of the things they're not supposed to know." He paused and glanced at the house elf. "Same with Kreacher."

Kreacher looked at Sirius and Harry in fear. "You know how to memory cha-"

"*Obliviate*," Harry tiredly cast on Kreacher before he could finish the sentence. "Dammit, Sirius. That's another hour you're going to be performing at the park."

Kreacher shook his dazed little head. "Masters?"

"Go back to whatever you were doing, Kreacher," Harry ordered, happy to see the house elf pop away.

"I just wanted to make sure my dad was okay." Tonks was talking to herself. "It's too early for the Harry and Sirius special brand of insanity."

"Is she talking about me?" Bellatrix asked the others uncertainly.

"Hey Harry," Tonks said tilting her head towards him with a rueful grin. "I don't think things could possibly get worse."

"Don't say that!" Harry snapped. "I told you never to say that around me." He stopped and looked around the hallway for any death traps about to be sprung.

After ten seconds of silence, Harry relaxed and let his wand arm fall. "I guess we got lucky that time."

A massive explosion sounded and the entire building shook.

"Dammit," Harry swore and ran down the hall towards the front door. He stuck his head around the window to get a quick view and whipped it back instinctively. He then processed what his eyes saw in that split second. No groups of Death Eaters, nor an angry mob with torches. Just a muggle construction crew tearing down the building across the street.

"Huh," Harry said, moving directly in front of the window to watch the street scene. "It's just the muggles across the way."

The entire group had hurried down the stairs after Harry and they were all crowding around the window now to see the destruction going on.

"How'd they do that?" Sirius was asking while leaning over Harry's shoulder.

Remus and Tonks were on the other side watching as well, while Bellatrix was peering around the edge curiously.

"Hello," Harry said pointing down the street. "Look over there. You can see the dust outlines of a couple of disillusioned blokes."

"What? Where?" Sirius asked curiously.

"I don't see them," Tonks was looking.

"Are they Death Eaters?" Bellatrix asked.

"Probably," Harry answered, still pointing in their direction. "It could be the Ministry or someone else, but my money's on Death Eaters."

Remus was looking where Harry had pointed. "Are they crouching?"

"What are we looking at?"

Harry stopped suddenly having recognized a voice he wasn't expecting to hear. He turned around and couldn't see past the bodies crowding him. "Umm... what are you doing here?"

"I'm trying to see what you're pointing at," she answered sticking her head out. "But Tonks oversized rump is blocking my view."

"Ginny!" Tonks exclaimed moving out of the way.

"Hi Tonks."

Bellatrix curiously looked at the ghost. "I don't believe we've met. Ginny, was it?"

Ginny let out an eep of surprise not noticing there was an uninformed person present. She floated and leaned down towards Harry. "I don't want to alarm you, but Bellatrix is standing right behind you."

Harry glanced at the woman and back to Ginny. He leaned towards the ghost and answered, "I was aware of that fact. But did you realize that she's not deaf and can hear you just fine?"

"Great," Bellatrix grumbled. "Another one who hates me and probably won't tell me why."

"What's she doing here?" Ginny asked at a normal volume while watching the elder woman pout.

“Primarily she wants a baby,” Harry calmly answered. “That’s why Sirius and I are going to do our best to stick Moony into unavoidably provocative situations with her.”

Ginny saw Remus and Tonks both look worried. She smiled and asked, “What kind of situations?”

Sirius shrugged. “Maybe handcuff them both to a couch and cover them in chocolate syrup.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “She’s got that pale complexion, so use dark chocolate.”

Tonks saw Remus was picturing it as his eyes’ widened slightly. She punched him in the chest, “Stop that.”

“Could you use a cherry syrup so I can at least pretend it’s blood?” Bellatrix suggested.

They all turned to look at her and collectively concluded she wasn’t going to be winning any mother-of-the-year awards anytime soon.

“How about this,” Remus said as a bright idea came to him. “I’ll help Bellatrix out, if she can convince Tonks that it’s something I should do.”

Bellatrix looked over at Tonks hopefully, trying to get a better measure of the young woman.

Tonks looked away from Bellatrix and got right into her adoptive father’s face. She was looking him straight in the eye, not daring to use any magic, but simply trying to get a read on his emotions.

Remus was beginning to get worried as Tonks was staring at him. He suddenly realized she was threatening to hand him over to Bellatrix.

Tonks smirked as she caught the flash of fear in Remus’ eye. She looked away and clapped her hands. “Alright then. Go make me a little sister.”

Remus was cornered and fought down a whimper at the eager look on Bellatrix's face.

"It's too early in the morning. And now that I know dad's not been taken by Death Eaters," Tonks gave Bellatrix an unwelcome look, "present company excluded, I'm going to go to home and go to bed."

Remus felt ashamed, not knowing Tonks was going to check on him last night.

"Harry," Tonks firmly ordered. "Don't bring a girl home tonight. I've got to work until graveyard's first break, but when I'm off, I am going to ride you raw. Good day."

Tonks apparated away with a pop just as Harry nodded meekly, "Yes, ma'am."

"She added that phrase for my benefit," Remus stated distastefully.

Ginny shrugged. "She could have been trying to give Bellatrix some ideas."

"Is anyone going to fill me in on this new ghost named Ginny?" Bellatrix asked. She saw them all trading looks with no one speaking up. "Fine. I figured as much. Come along, Remus," Bellatrix beckoned. "You've got work to do."

Remus was luckily able to avoid a moral dilemma so far by letting others make his decisions for him. But he felt like he was going to get into even more trouble with his daughter if he did what she told him to do. "It's my day off," Remus begged. "Can't I just come back tonight?"

"You'd prefer to wait," Bellatrix clarified, "until Tonks, your daughter, is in the room down the hall?"

Remus winced and conceded. "Oh *fine*. Let's get this over with."

Harry and Sirius were left standing by the window, while the building across the street was being demolished. Ginny was floating next to them, "So... slow morning?"

“Want to go see if they’re marked Death Eaters?” Harry asked looking at the disillusioned pair.

“Alright,” Sirius nodded. “Apparate around the corner.”

Ginny just remained floating by the window, knowing Harry hadn’t gone far, since he hadn’t pulled her with him. She watched as a glamour-covered old woman was being pulled down the street by a hyperactive dog on a leash. The dog was sniffing the air and bounded over near the two hidden wizards. He happily lifted a leg and peed on their disillusioned feet. The dog bounded away around the corner pulling the old lady with him.

Another pop and Sirius and Harry were back in the front room.

“Death Eaters?” Ginny asked.

“Death Eaters,” Harry agreed having used a snake to confirm it. “But I get the feeling they’re just here to observe.”

Sirius nodded. “In which case, I may need to make a habit of peeing on them every day. Sounds like a good way to start the day.”

Harry was scratching his head. “Are we forgetting something?”

Sirius looked at Ginny and shrugged.

A number of shrieks sounded from up the stairs. “That’s right,” Harry said snapping his fingers. “The muggles.”

They hurried up the stairs where two of the girls were horrified that they couldn’t wake up their sister, and screaming their heads off in response.

Sirius looked at Harry and asked, “You mind if I get the camera, since, I mean, you’re *already* going to be obliterating them...”

“Sirius, that’s horrible,” Harry said shaking his head in disgust. He paused and nodded, “Okay. Get the camera.”

Harry and Tonks were standing across from the three transfigured midgets settling limply into the sofa. Remus was slumped against the right armrest, Kreacher was hanging over the side of the left armrest, and Sirius was slouched down the middle. All three were laboring to catch their breath.

Harry was smiling brightly, even more so when the midgets would frown at him. "It appears you all fell short of the one hour you owed."

"That counts!" Sirius whined in a squeaky nasal voice.

Harry glanced over at Tonks. "What do you think? Was that long enough?"

"I don't know," Tonks said crossing her arms and looking at midget-sized Remus. "How long did it take you to screw my mother's sister—you know, a member of the criminal organization who murdered my mother and father? Did *that* fall short of an hour? Hmm?"

Bellatrix felt annoyed and proud that her niece could hold a grudge. She mumbled from the doorway, "I said I was sorry."

Remus was panting still and claimed in a charmed high-pitched voice, "Yes, it was definitely under an hour."

"He's lying," Bellatrix chimed in.

"I hate you!" Remus squeaked staring at Bellatrix.

"Oh Merlin," Bellatrix deadpanned. "Someone hates me. What ever shall I do?"

"Alright," Harry interrupted. "Since you failed to complete a full hour—"

"It's not our fault we had to leave!" Sirius complained over Kreacher's quiet whimpering.

"Yeah," Remus agreed. "Blame whichever concerned parent called the police. Don't blame us."

"As I was saying," Harry continued. "We may be willing to give you credit for the hour, if you can at least prove that you've *learned* from the experience. So tell us," Harry said waving his hand towards Tonks and himself. "What have you learned?"

Sirius was slid back into the couch cushions. He turned his head towards Remus on his right and the surprisingly docile Kreacher on his left. "What?"

"What have you learned?" Harry repeated. "Didn't you learn anything today or do we need to repeat this particular life lesson?"

Remus raised his stubby little midget arm into the air and said, "I've learned why people include the words 'and unusual' in the phrase 'cruel and unusual punishment.'"

"Thank you, Moony," Harry said with a smile. "Now I know you were trying to be a smart-ass, but you did point out something constructive that you learned. Sirius, what about you?"

"I learned," Sirius mused while scratching his disproportionately sized chin. "I learned there's no way in hell midgets can run away on foot, unless they have fences to crawl under."

"Or unless," Remus added, "the pursuers are really tall. Then you can double back by diving between their legs."

"Good point," Sirius applauded. "*And* I learned accidental midget head butts are another reason you should always wear a protective cup."

"Don't forget giants stubbing their toes and secretly charmed slappable bars. Two more very good arguments for wearing a cup," Harry added while reminiscing past pain. He turned to the quietest midget. "Kreacher, have you learned anything?"

Kreacher was still feeling revolted with his current transfigured form but earnestly answered, "Kreacher learned children cry when he hugs them. And they kick too."

Tonks coughed and explained, "I think the reason they cry has more to do with the fact that you kept sneaking up behind them and hugging them unexpectedly."

"And they probably could sense your inherent evil," Sirius added.

"Probably," the house elf nodded. "Kreacher could definitely sense theirs."

Harry asked, "Is that all you learned, Kreacher?"

Kreacher could feel the noose tightening and shook his head. "No Master!"

Harry tilted his head, silently asking Kreacher to elaborate.

Kreacher looked around frantically for help.

Remus felt pity for the house elf and supplied, "Did you learn anything when Sirius tried to jump through the policeman's legs and missed?"

"Yes!" Kreacher cheered happily. "Kreacher learned children laugh when humans get hit in their penis places!"

"Not just children," Harry said with a snicker.

"I wouldn't say 'learned' as much as I reaffirmed what I suspected," Remus said, "in that people do not keep midgets on leashes and take them for walks."

"I think we also learned," Tonks jumped in while giving Harry a scolding look, "that just because you're wearing a glamour, doesn't mean you should introduce yourself by saying, *'Hi, I'm Vernon Dursley. I'm a horrible person and I keep my midget son locked in a cage.'*"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Maybe *you* learned that..."

"Well hang on," Tonks replied, confronting Harry. "What did you learn then?"

“Me?” Harry repeated. He gave it a bit of thought and said, “I learned people get upset when you drop kick a midget.” He was shaking his head in surprise, “*Even* if it’s a biter.”

Sirius was tugging on the straps across his chest. “I learned that just because you can fit into a toddler’s leash harness, doesn’t mean it’ll be comfortable.”

“Oh!” Kreacher raised his hand. “Kreacher learned it’s easy to tie a leash in a knot, if Kreacher loops it around Master’s neck first.”

Sirius frowned at Kreacher. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about that.”

“Kreacher also learned carousels can be magicked to go faster.”

Remus grinned. “I suppose I learned that toddler harnesses are strong enough to handle the centrifugal forces of a carousel.”

Sirius sighed. “I learned that if you’re being dragged on the ground by a magicked carousel, then it’s funny to throw up. But only for as long as it takes to make one revolution.”

“Yes,” Kreacher agreed thinking of another. “Kreacher learned Master had a bacon and bacon sandwich for lunch.”

Sirius nodded while scratching his normal sized head on his midget sized body. “And I reckon I learned that I need to chew my food more.”

“I learned,” Harry said smiling brightly with Tonks, “that sometimes three rolls of film just isn’t enough.”

“And I learned,” Tonks deviously grinned, “how useful disillusioning a pair of omnioculars can be.”

“See?” Sirius said. “We all learned a lot. No need to repeat or ever mention this day again.”

“Is that it?” Harry asked Tonks who still looked skeptical. He turned back towards the sofa. “Nothing else you guys learned?”

"Kreacher learned Master can be a cruel and vindictive bastard," Kreacher happily supplied.

"I already knew that," Sirius and Remus both said at the same time.

"I don't mean to... *belittle* you," Harry said, relishing in the staggered groans from everyone other than the confused house elf. "But Kreacher meant it as a compliment."

"Can you change us back now?" Remus begged. "And put an end to the most humiliating experience of my life?"

Tonks scoffed, "You slept with Bellatrix."

"Fine," Remus corrected. "Second most humiliating."

"I'm *right* here," Bellatrix whined from the door.

The four other humans turned and saw Bellatrix leaning against the doorjamb. After a moment's worth of acknowledgement they turned back towards themselves.

"Besides," Harry said. "You should at least wait until after Monday's Quibbler comes out before deciding on your most humiliating moment." Harry glanced over at Bellatrix and corrected, "Or second most."

Sirius popped the top on a nice cool butterbeer and relaxed back in his recliner. He peered through his omnioculars and saw the heat signatures of two people still at home. He looked over at Harry who appeared to be focusing his eyes on the layers and sets of wards.

"So?" Sirius asked. "You said you'd tell me when we got some down time. What did you see? I know it wasn't just grey mist or you would've told me that this morning."

Harry had taken the animagus potion the night before and it had been every bit as fruitless as his previous attempts. "It was almost all just grey mist. I wish it had been just mist, then maybe I could convince myself it was really an invisible Demiguise."

"You saw something else?" Sirius asked setting his omnioculars down.

Harry shook his head. "Nothing new. It was like the trance McGonagall put me under. And again a blurry figure started to come into focus. It was like I was invisible but could see my reflection."

"Harry's form got killed," Sirius melodiously ridiculed. "Harry's form got killed."

"I woke up before the shape came into focus," Harry said with a shrug. "Could be anyone... but the way it carried itself, it had the same mannerisms as me. It's like it showed up just to ruin my aspirations of a Demiguise form."

Sirius looked through the omnioculars again. "Both are gone. You want to run some diagnostics on the outer wards? Trigger test?"

Harry shook his head. "Let's not rush ourselves and cut out the legwork. They could be back at any time. And I don't want to simply trust the information Bellatrix provided when we can verify it ourselves."

Sirius was scanning through the place with his omnioculars. "When she gets knocked up, let's move her into her own place."

"Why wait?" Harry said feeling an owl trip one of his perimeter wards. He looked up as the owl flew straight toward them.

"We got mail," Harry told Sirius as he looked over the back of his chair.

"Can they get through the Fidelius?"

"We're invisible until it crosses the charm, but it's an owl," Harry replied. "They know where to go by sense, not by sight."

The owl flew down and landed on the back of Harry's chair. He untied the letter and recognized the handwriting on the envelope immediately.

Harry handed the letter to Sirius without opening it. "Can't she pretend I'm a perfectly normal excessively emotional teen who just doesn't want to hear from or talk to his parents?"

"Another letter from Lily?" Sirius asked happily, cracking it open. He slowly read through the short missive and announced, "She's inviting us to Hogwarts. A meal, a tour, access to the world-renowned library? She just doesn't give up, does she?"

Harry looked over at Sirius while remembering one of the things Bellatrix had told him. "Invited us to Hogwarts? You know there are a number of books on warding and animagi in the restricted section."

"You want to go?" Sirius asked in surprise.

"It's not a half bad idea," Harry said indifferently. "And there is one thing I'd like to check."

"You do realize Dumbledore won't leave us alone for a second," Sirius added.

Harry settled back into his recliner. "That's assuming we don't split up. If we split up, one of us can keep Dumbledore busy, while I go and check my thing."

"Subtle, Harry," Sirius tiredly grumbled.

Harry began to weigh the reasons to go to Hogwarts against the reasons to decline the invitation.

"You really think we should go?"

Harry shrugged. "I get the feeling she's going to keep inviting us until we say yes."

"Probably," Sirius agreed. "And afterwards we can hit the Hog's Head and see how Gin is doing."

Harry looked over at Sirius and slowly nodded. "Yeah. Let's go to Hogwarts and have dinner with my... yeah."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ginny floated down to check out the kitchen and found that it wasn't empty.

Bellatrix looked up and caught the gaze of the tentative ghost. "Hello," she greeted.

"Hi," Ginny succinctly replied.

Neither was sure what to make of the other. After an awkward silence they both began at the same time, "So..."

"Sorry," Ginny apologized first. "Go ahead."

"No, no," Bellatrix shook her head. "I'm not even sure what I was going to say but it probably would have been something dumb. Please, what were you saying?"

"Right," Ginny said knowing she too was just trying to fill the air. "I was just gonna say, sleeping with Moony, eh? How's that going?"

"Hmm," Bellatrix wondered. "I guess it's been... productive?"

"Well that's..." Ginny paused thinking most males would not take that as a sterling endorsement on their sexual prowess. She settled on finishing, "...good."

"Don't get me wrong," Bellatrix explained. "The process is pleasant."

"Pleasant," Ginny repeated.

"Pleasurable even," Bellatrix said. "That's a better description. It's just... I mean I've had sex with people that hate me before."

"Naturally," Ginny agreed thinking how limited Bellatrix's options would be if she didn't sleep with people that hate her.

Bellatrix frowned and continued, "But I guess with Remus, it's like he hates himself just as much."

"You don't mind that he's a werewolf?" Ginny inquired wondering if Bellatrix was letting her membership in the cruel and racist club expire.

Bellatrix shrugged. "I suppose I'd rather he wasn't, but so would Remus. I'm just glad my baby-daddy is someone the Lords Black like. I'll take the sperm however it comes."

"Huh," Ginny chuckled uneasily at the pun. "That's funny."

Bellatrix sighed and exasperatedly said, "You know I'm fine with you hating me for no reason, right?"

"Oh good," Ginny said in relief. "I mean I kinda felt bad, considering *everybody* hates you. And I didn't really want to pile on but... it *is* you."

Bellatrix looked closer at Ginny. "I didn't kill you, did I?"

Ginny shook her head.

"Because that might actually explain a few things."

"Nope," Ginny assured her. "You didn't kill me. I know who killed me. And Harry killed him."

"Anyone I know?" Bellatrix asked.

Ginny quickly quieted. "Don't think you ever met him."

"Alright," Bellatrix agreed recognizing the ghost's reticence. "Let's change the subject."

Ginny floated there for a moment and suggested, "Or I could just leave."

"Wait," Bellatrix pleaded. "I..."

"Yes?"

"I wanted to ask you something, and please, don't take this personally. I don't mean to offend you."

Ginny shrugged. "I already hate you."

"Good point," Bellatrix replied. "And like I said don't take this personally, but... are you, that is, I guess... Alright, I'm just going to say it. Are you a Weasley?"

Ginny harrumphed. "What's so bad about Weasleys?"

"Oh-kay," Bellatrix backed away. "That answers that question."

"Maybe there haven't been quite so many homicidal psychotic bitches in the Weasley family as in some families, but..."

"Do you not remember your mother at all?" Harry jokingly asked from the door.

Ginny turned back towards Harry. "Hey now, she wasn't... homicidal."

Harry looked at Ginny and said nothing.

"Okay there was that one time," Ginny admitted. "But that shouldn't count."

Harry looked at Ginny curiously. "Are you implying your mother was a psychotic bitch?"

"You didn't live with her through menopause."

Harry winced imagining how well Molly Weasley would have accepted that. "Point taken."

"I was just wondering because you look like a Weasley," Bellatrix explained. "And there's so damn many of you I wouldn't be surprised if your parents couldn't keep track of them all."

Harry chuckled.

Ginny frowned at Harry. "I thought you loved the Weasleys."

"With as much as he loves and as many as there are," Bellatrix retorted. "It's almost mathematically impossible for him not to have at least once or twice."

"Hey," Harry intelligently defended.

"I'm not talking about whoring himself around like a whorey whore," Ginny snapped. "This is just a phase until he comes to terms with my death."

"Really?" Bellatrix asked skeptically. She looked at Harry and asked, "Is that why you're such a slut?"

"He's not a bigger slut than me," Sirius jumped in as he walked up behind Harry.

Harry just shook his head. "We're going to get a little work done. We'll be back this afternoon. You're not going anywhere, are you?"

"I'm going to go that muggle store to buy some pregnancy tests," Bellatrix said. "But other than that, I'll be here."

"Be careful," Harry said. "Those two Death Eaters are still camping out across the street last I checked."

"Peed on them this morning," Sirius asserted.

"And while they seem content to just observe us," Harry explained pointing at himself and Sirius. "I'm not sure you're going to get extended similar kindness."

"Although," Sirius happily suggested. "If you decide that you want to die-"

"Let's go," Harry interrupted grabbing onto Sirius apparating them both away with a crack.

Bellatrix turned towards Ginny. "Looks like it's just you and me."

Ginny looked at Bellatrix curiously before she too felt a tug and was sent careening through the ether towards wherever Harry had apparated off too.

"Or just me," Bellatrix corrected to herself. She began to wonder over how quickly she was able to clear a room. She took a careful sniff of

her own armpits before realizing what she was doing. "I just want anyone invisibly watching me right now to know that that wasn't what it looked like. But I won't explain it, until you reveal yourselves."

Bellatrix was a mixture of relieved and disappointed when no one came forward.

"Why wait until tonight?" Sirius said looking through his magical omnioculars. "We could probably take care of this before dinner."

Harry saw Ginny had stayed visible and tagged along. He answered, "Because he's got a mission tonight and I'd rather save the larceny until after our dinner with... them."

"Tell me again why you're robbing this guy?" Ginny asked, pretending to lay down on the edge of Harry's chair.

"Because he's a Death Eater and we've never heard of him," Sirius answered.

"What's his name?" Ginny inquired, being careful not to yell right in Harry's ear.

"Alan Weston," Harry replied.

"Never heard of him," Ginny agreed. "So why him?"

"Because we're manly men and we like challenges," Sirius assured her looking at the property with his omnioculars.

Harry flipped a twig at Sirius and explained, "Because he's got better wards here than a crappy looking place like that should have. Which to me says there's something worth stealing in there."

"I think we can call it official," Sirius announced. "No house elves and I still haven't been able to make out a painting yet."

"Did you get any fun names from your interrogation of Bella, besides of course the mysterious Alan Weston?" Ginny asked pointing towards the veiled property she couldn't see.

“Probably the most interesting one was a name I didn’t get,” Harry said.

“He counts,” Sirius moaned.

Harry was enjoying Sirius’ frustration and looked over at the ghost. “It appears in this world Severus Snape never joined the Death Eaters.”

“What?” Ginny asked. “Really?”

“He counts,” Sirius repeated.

Harry was quite amused. “Apparently, they turned him down.”

Sirius went from grumbling to alert and indignant immediately. “You never mentioned that part!”

“I enjoyed it more knowing you didn’t know,” Harry said with a snicker. “I never even considered that the Dark Lord could say no.”

Sirius was torn between staring down Harry and laughing out loud to think Severus tried to join the Death Eaters and got rejected.

“Apparently, it drove him straight to Dumbledore,” Harry said. “In fairness, he was still in school at the time so Dumbledore may have just been close by.”

“That’s awesome,” Sirius exclaimed happily.

“Well I’m glad to hear you think so,” Harry said with a grin. “Because I told Lily you were hoping to talk Potions with him over dinner. She made sure that you’ll get to sit next to Severus.”

Sirius’ face fell. “That’s not even funny, Harry.”

“The rumor is that when Snape heard the news, he actually smiled,” Harry calmly explained. “If that’s true, then you’re probably his best friend.”

Sirius’ mouth twitched. “Okay, maybe it’s a little funny.”

Ginny entertained herself by poking her ghostly finger through Harry's shoulder.

Sirius acted unconcerned and asked, "You were kidding, right?"

Harry glanced at Sirius, said nothing, and turned back towards the wards of the property with a smug smile.

"Ha-ha, point made," Sirius rambled. "No Snivellus though, right? Right? Just tell me, dammit!"

Harry could not stop smiling at the mere sight of the first real home that he remembered. Since he had last seen the castle, he'd gained a new appreciation for ward work and Hogwarts was a real treat. The Hogwarts wards reminded Harry of Swiss cheese made of steel. The wards were as solid as any in the world, excusing the obvious and gigantic holes. It wasn't long before the wards were just too bright and Harry was forced to cancel his oculamagi spell.

"Hey Harry?" Sirius tried to sound jovial but the worry was apparent in his voice. "You're not going to break down and cry like a sissy, are you?"

Harry stopped walking and turned to his godfather.

"Because I mean when you become a pathetic blubbering mess and start calling her Mum-"

Harry cast a silencing charm around them and put a hand on Sirius to keep him from walking away. "Stop. Look at me, Padfoot."

Sirius turned to look at Harry. He saw how humorless Harry's expression was and suggested, "If you want to tell them the truth..."

"Do you want to tell them?" Harry asked, already knowing the answer. "This is your secret too."

Sirius paused almost afraid to be the cause of Harry's theoretical emotional distress.

“Relax. I know I’ve always been indifferent to telling the Potters who we are,” Harry explained. “But let me reiterate what should have been abundantly clear by now. You, Sirius, mean a lot more to me than James and Lily do.”

“Lily and James,” Sirius softly corrected. “It sounds nicer saying her name first because she’s a better person.”

“Lily and James,” Harry repeated with a grin, while keeping his hand on his godfather’s shoulder and looking him right in the eye. “Lily and James are not my parents. My parents died a long time ago. My parents were a couple of *your* best friends.” Harry pointed up towards the castle. “Those two people barely know you. They had to grieve for a lost baby and have since raised a couple more kids in a family that never existed in our old world. Treating them like my parents is an insult to my parents’ memory.”

Sirius was about to respond but Harry put up a hand to stop him.

“I highly doubt my real parents would begrudge me if I did treat this Lily and James like parents,” Harry explained. “But it matters to me. And while I’d like to get to know Lily and James, they are not and never will be my parents. Nor will they ever be as important to me as my godfather, the person my parents chose to look after me in their absence.”

Sirius’ eyes were getting a little watery as he couldn’t keep the smile off his face. “I love you, kid,” Sirius exclaimed hugging Harry as tight as he had the first time he’d seen him in this world.

“I love you too,” Harry said hugging Sirius back. He pulled back and looked Sirius in the eye again. “Now do us both a favor,” Harry grabbed Sirius’ chin to make sure he was paying complete attention to him. “Act like a fucking man, you little bitch.”

Sirius pretended to be offended as Harry spun him around.

Harry slapped his godfather on the ass and said, “Besides, it looks like your new best friend is headed this way.”

Sirius' eyes widened and he turned back to Harry fearfully. "Why is Snivellus walking this way? Why Harry, why?"

Harry just smiled saying nothing and canceled his silencing charm.

Severus spotted the two men ahead of him and was trying to avoid eye contact.

"Listen," Sirius explained pointing straight towards Severus Snape as he approached. "I don't know hardly anything about Potions and Harry here's a very cruel liar. I don't even like Potions."

Severus had been hoping to avoid them completely when Sirius addressed him with his absurd declarations. Severus responded in disgust, "Don't talk to me. Ever." He then veered around the two Lord Blacks and continued stalking in the direction he had been headed.

"He was just walking to the greenhouses," Harry happily said to his godfather. "Kind of an odd way for you to greet him, don't you think?"

Sirius felt as much like an idiot as he felt relief that Harry had only been joking earlier. "You're a dick."

Harry snickered. "Exactly what were you thinking when you saw that Snivellus was carrying flowers?"

"I saw my lunch flash before my eyes," Sirius answered turning to walk towards the Entrance Hall. "Oh, here they come."

Lily Potter, James Potter Jr., and Albus Dumbledore were all walking out to greet the Lords Black.

Harry stopped and whispered, "You really think wearing a Dementor's cloak would have sent the wrong message?"

"You passed out after wearing it for three minutes," Sirius reminded quietly from the corner of his mouth.

"Three and a half," Harry argued.

“Yeah,” Sirius decided. “That’s the wrong message. And you owe me for this.”

“Greetings,” Albus loudly said as the two Potters and he approached. “Lord Black and Lord Black. I’m delighted to see you accepted Professor Potter’s invitation.”

Harry could feel his mother’s approach and tried to pretend there was nothing out of the ordinary. “Please Headmaster, for tonight, I’m Harry and he’s Sirius.”

Sirius noticed Harry slinking away and slapped him hard on the shoulder in a friendly gesture, while adding, “But unless you count his back, he’s not really hairy. And I am rarely serious.”

“Oof,” Harry groaned, partly from the smack and partly from Sirius’ line. “Can’t you not crack a name joke, just once?”

Albus’ eyes were twinkling as he added, “If it makes you feel any better, I’ve never been more than two-thirds bus. Further proof there really is no truth in advertising.”

Jimmy, Harry, and Sirius all turned towards the Headmaster in silent disbelief.

Albus saw the looks he was receiving and how Lily seemed transfixed just at the sight of Harry. “Yes well, I believe you have already met our Head Boy, James Potter, and this is his mother, our Professor of Muggle Studies, Lily Potter.”

Lily felt the monster in her chest rising up and didn’t realize she was staring until Jimmy elbowed her and whispered, “Mum!”

“I’m sorry,” Lily said suddenly paying attention again. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you Harry, Sirius,” she greeted and shook both their hands.

“You too,” Sirius said, enjoying Harry’s silent discomfort.

“If the stories my son has been telling me are true, Harry,” Lily smiled warmly, “then I’d hate to be your mother.”

“What?” Harry blurted out before he could stop himself.

Lily kept the pleasant smile on her face as she explained, “The scars, the adventures, the danger? She must have been worried silly.”

“Oh,” Harry said, trying to act casual and failing. “Yeah, well she handled it pretty well considering-”

Sirius coughed and interrupted Harry, noticing Harry was sweating already.

Harry glanced at his godfather and helpfully explained with a smile, “She died when I was one.”

“Oh,” Lily stopped smiling and felt bad for being so insensitive.

Harry saw Lily’s face fall and tried to make her feel better, “My dad too.” Immediately after Harry said it, he wondered why he thought that would make her feel better.

Lily found herself pitying and sympathizing for Harry and added to the fun. “My firstborn son died.”

Everyone turned to her in surprise.

Lily saw them look at her and quickly explained, “He was one as well.” She belatedly realized that this was not the best way to lighten the mood.

The group of five were all exchanging looks at the awkward direction of the night’s first conversation.

Sirius finally broke the silence. “I had a goldfish once.”

“Sirius, stop,” Harry jumped in before his godfather could get going.

“Okay,” Sirius agreed not really wanting to dredge up painful memories of Goldie.

“How about a tour?” Albus said cheerfully changing the subject.

"We're not going to be eating with the students, are we?" Harry said as they all began to follow Albus. "Because I'm not big on being on display and Sirius could very well spend the whole time looking inappropriately at the seventh years."

"No," Albus chuckled, apparently unconcerned about an older man taking advantage of his students. "We'll be dining in a private chamber connected to my office. Though we are expecting James Potter and Remus and Tonks Lupin to join us when James' and Tonks' shifts end. I believe you have met them a few times. And Sarah Potter was called away with Madame Pomfrey to St. Mungos, but she may be able to join us as well."

"Oh good, *James*," Sirius said. "I think he's starting to warm up to me."

Jimmy made no effort to hide his derisive snort as he walked next to Harry.

Lily felt the need to defend her husband and explained, "You remind him too much of his best friend." Lily paused and observed Sirius for a couple seconds. "And now having met you, I can see the resemblance is uncanny."

"Really," Sirius said turning away to look at the castle as they slowly walked. "I hear that's pretty common among relatives."

"I suppose you do kind of look like him," Lily continued. "But I was referring to the way you carry yourself and your attitude. Sharing a name doesn't help matters either."

"Quite the co-inky-dink," Harry said pausing to look around and avoid the subject. "So this is... a hallway?"

"Yeah, tour?" Sirius said stopping to face Albus.

Albus was smiling mischievously and said, "I was going to explain to you the history of the Entrance Hall, but when you both kept walking I thought I'd see where you were leading us."

“Oops,” Sirius said looking at Harry who had been also walking through Hogwarts forgetting that they weren’t supposed to know their way around. “I thought I was following you.”

“And I thought I was following you,” Harry said nodding at Albus.

“It is always interesting the places our feet will take us,” Albus assured them. “And you were quite correct. This is a hallway.”

“Fascinating,” Harry said looking around.

“Actually, it is an interesting story as you’ll notice the shift in color here,” Albus began to explain while pointing at the wall. “The stone in this section of the hallway is only about seven centuries old. Contrary to popular belief, many-”

“Oww!” Jimmy yelped out attracting everyone’s attention as he rubbed the area of his arm that had been pinched by an invisible arm.

Albus had stopped and looked towards Jimmy while glancing at the others. “Is something the matter?”

“No, I...” Jimmy trailed off at the look from Harry and quickly corrected. “Sorry! I just remembered I need to talk to Harry privately about a project. And with dinner and everything, I figured I should get it out of the way now.”

“Perhaps we all could be of assistance?” Albus offered.

“No,” Jimmy insisted. “That’s a bad idea because...” He looked to Harry for help.

Harry rolled his eyes and jumped in. “Jimmy had some research questions about the uniqueness of magic and my magic in particular. I don’t want to be a sideshow freak, so I agreed to help him understand singular magical phenomena as long as we avoid specifics. You guys go on with the tour. We’ll catch up.”

Albus frowned. “I really would rather we-”

“Surely the Head Boy won’t be getting lost,” Harry interrupted. “If your unease comes from my secretive nature, just have Fawkes keep an eye on us.”

Albus tilted his head down to look at Harry and the very nervous looking James Potter Jr. without the buffer of his glasses. “I am sorry to say I cannot just order Fawkes to-”

He was interrupted by the flash of fire and sudden appearance of the phoenix in question.

“Looks like the flying puppy comes when called,” Harry said with a smile.

Albus looked on in surprise when his companion didn’t seem to take offense. “Fawkes?”

Fawkes was staring at Harry and flew over to his shoulder, nodding at Albus.

Harry reached up a hand to pet the phoenix only to see the bird was tilting to its side, clearly lifting its leg like a puppy.

“Don’t even think about it,” Harry said pointing at the bird.

Fawkes put both legs down and gripped tightly, pinching Harry.

Harry winced while acting overly masculine, as if he was unaffected by a minor pinch. “Great then,” Harry gasped quietly as Fawkes tightened his hold. “Jimmy, you said something about an unused classroom you picked out?”

“Yeah,” Jimmy agreed with a hop in his step. “Follow me.”

“We’ll wait for you in the library,” Lily called out towards her son.

They hurried down the corridor and around a corner. Jimmy was going to continue down towards the dungeons when Harry jerked on his arm and said, “This way.”

Harry stopped and saw they were clear. "Did you bring the invisibility cloak?"

"I'm trying to go with the flow like your letter said," Jimmy explained. "But I don't have an invisibility cloak. My dad does but I can't afford one."

"He didn't give it to you?" Harry asked in shock. "That's wrong on so many levels."

Jimmy shrugged. "He seems to think I'd just use it to get into trouble."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "But with the cloak you wouldn't get caught so it's not really trouble."

Jimmy chuckled. "I don't think Dad would go for that argument."

"Make sure no one's coming," Harry instructed as he unshrunk his satchel and pulled out his own invisibility cloak. "I just brought one, so we're going to have to huddle."

Harry still had Fawkes on his shoulder and pulled the cloak over the three of them. Jimmy inched closer but still the cloak didn't even reach their knees.

"That's not gonna work," Harry stated.

"I can be disillusioned."

"No, that's too obvious when you're running," Harry said.

Jimmy took a step back and asked, "I'm going to be running?"

Harry took a moment to think about it and shrugged. "I wouldn't rule it out."

Fawkes vanished in a burst of flame from under the cloak only to reappear right on top of it and clamp back down on Harry's shoulder. The cloak settled down almost to their ankles.

Harry looked up through the haze of the cloak at the mischievous bird and smiled. "That'll work. We'll just have to hunch a bit."

They slowly began to sneak their way down the hallway.

“Hey Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“How come Fawkes wasn’t offended when you called him a flying puppy? I thought phoenixes were proud creatures.”

Harry looked up at the bird on his shoulder. He explained, “Fawkes wasn’t offended because he knows I like phoenixes and just said that to annoy him. And he also knows that acting like it doesn’t bother him annoys me right back. But I know how much it really irritates-OWW!” Harry shrieked as the phoenix’s claws dug into his shoulder.

“Shh,” Jimmy said from Harry’s other side. “Someone’s coming.”

Two young girls came walking around the corner and stopped at the sight of a mysteriously floating phoenix.

Harry tapped Jimmy on the shoulder and they slowly continued walking down the hall towards the two girls.

“Are you seeing what I’m seeing?” The first girl asked her friend in glasses.

The second girl with glasses took off her spectacles and wiped them clean on her robe. She put her glasses back on. “Phoenixes are birds. Of course they can fly.”

“Yeah but usually they have to flap their wings!”

The girl with glasses squinted at the approaching creature. “That is odd.”

Harry and Jimmy silently walked right past the two girls who were just staring at Fawkes in fascination. The girls felt special knowing how few people were lucky enough to see a phoenix floating so close.

Harry held up his finger telling Jimmy to be quiet. As soon as they were past the girls and Fawkes' back was facing them, Harry loudly intoned, "There's a lot you don't know about phoenixes."

"Ahh!" the first girl shrieked in fright as she began to run down the hall.

"They speak English!" the one in glasses exclaimed chasing after her friend. "And in a surprisingly deep voice!"

"Ahh!" was her friend's only response.

Harry was holding onto Jimmy who was cracking up next to him. He could feel Fawkes amusement as well. "Come on. Don't get the giggles on me."

They managed to make their way to down to the second floor girls' bathroom that was widely known to be haunted.

"Your adventure for me is to sneak into the girls' bathroom?" Jimmy asked worriedly. He indignantly added, "And not even one of the high traffic ones?"

"Shh," Harry said. "I don't particularly want to talk to Myrtle so keep it down."

Once they were in the room Harry cast a locking charm on the door, ensuring privacy. He gave Fawkes a brief warning and whipped the invisibility cloak off. "No," Harry explained after double-checking that the bathroom was empty. "I thought I'd take you somewhere legendary. And you know, hopefully not get either of us killed."

"Legendary?" Jimmy perked up. He watched Harry reach down to a sink and hiss in parseltongue at it. Jimmy's voice cracked a little as he asked, "Killed?"

Harry took a step back and smiled as the sinks began shifting to reveal a huge pipe. "This, my friend, is the entrance to Salazar Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets."

"A girls' bathroom?" Jimmy repeated incredulously.

Harry shrugged. "I'm not one to judge, but I figure there's a story behind it."

Jimmy walked up to the edge and saw no end to the pipe in the darkness.

Harry looked down the hole and explained, "It's a test of faith. It looks like a never-ending hole, and anything you test it with will act as if it's a hole," Harry added when Jimmy tossed an old bar of soap into the pipe.

"But if you have faith that the platform is there, and you take a full step right on to it, it's there." Harry saw Jimmy getting focused and held up a hand to stop him. "Don't step on the platform until you're sure."

Jimmy took another deep breath and looked straight at Harry, refusing to even look down the pipe when he stepped forward.

Harry was going to remember for a long time the face that Jimmy made when he tumbled head first down the pipe. He listened for Jimmy's shrieking to reach the end. He looked at Fawkes, "You want to ride with me?"

Fawkes shook his head.

"Didn't think so," Harry said. He shut his mouth and squeezed his nose as he slid down the massive pipe.

He let his body sway with the motions as he slipped down the dusty, grimy pipe. Listening carefully and remembering the fall, Harry held his arms out and slowed himself down just as he reached the bottom. He managed to gracefully land on his feet right in the middle of his first step forward.

Harry grinned brightly. "Didn't have enough faith, did you?"

"There never was a platform, was there?" Jimmy said in resignation.

"Certainly not with that attitude."

Jimmy cast a cleansing charm on Harry without prompting. "I gotta say, as secret chambers go, so far, I'm unimpressed."

"We got a few pipes to walk through," Harry said drawing his wand and taking the lead. "And do me a favor."

"Yeah?"

"If you see anything moving, close your eyes, and go fetal. Alright?"

Jimmy had been walking with Harry and stopped right where he was. "Excuse me?"

"As a favor to me," Harry urged.

Jimmy quickly thought back to what he knew of Salazar's not so mythical chamber. "Isn't this chamber supposed to house a monster of some sort? And I know some words can get twisted through time but *monster* is a pretty clear one."

Harry reluctantly nodded. "Hence the *close your eyes and go fetal*."

"What are we doing down here anyway?"

"Well..." Harry admitted. "I kinda don't think the monster is here. And I figured I'd just take a peek and see if it is."

"We're here *looking* for the monster?"

Harry turned back at Jimmy and nodded, pointing to the side.

Jimmy moved away from the door while Harry hissed another parseltongue password. Jimmy verbally agreed, "Closing my eyes and going fetal sounds like a pretty good plan."

"Hey Fawkes?" Harry called out as the phoenix flew up. "Keep an eye on the kid, would you?"

"I'm not a kid," Jimmy argued. As Harry walked through the circular serpent like door, Jimmy turned to the phoenix and whispered, "Anything happens and you get me out of there. If I die, it's your fault."

Jimmy hurried to catch up with Fawkes hanging on to him. "I'm not a kid, Harry."

"You do realize you're Head *Boy* at a school for *children*?"

Jimmy silently pouted.

"Relax Jimmy," Harry said as he spotted an old decaying massive shed skin. "I call you a kid the same way I call Fawkes a..."

"A flying puppy?"

"I used that one already," Harry paused still thinking about it. He snapped his fingers in success, "An Augurey with a combustion problem."

Jimmy winced, "Oww Fawkes. Redirect that anger at him not me. Him." Jimmy almost tripped and looked to the ground. "What is this? Some kind of fungal growth?"

Harry glanced at his unofficial brother.

"It covers almost this entire pipe," Jimmy stated as he bent down to break a piece of it off. "And it doesn't tear at all."

"It's not a fungus," Harry assured him. "You don't recognize this?"

"Its texture looks like a repeating pattern."

"It's skin, Jimmy."

"Skin?" Jimmy repeated doubtfully. "No way. This thing is thick and huge. Not even the largest Horntail gets this size. And usually only snakes..." Jimmy trailed off taking a step back. He looked all the way down the pipe in both directions realizing just how big the faux fungal growth was. "Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"You wouldn't really put my life in danger, right?"

"Of course not."

“So this isn’t the shed skin of basilisk big enough to use us as toothpicks, right?”

Harry paused before answering, “I wouldn’t *really* put your life in danger.”

“Harry.”

“Besides, basilisks can’t use toothpicks. They have no arms.”

“*This one might!* It’s probably big enough to have evolved.”

“Don’t be silly,” Harry said getting to the last door before the main chamber. “But don’t forget that ‘close your eyes and go fetal’ plan either.”

“You’re supposed to be assuring me and comforting me. Not scaring me.”

Harry stepped into the main chamber and saw the rows and rows of carved serpents. “Sure thing, kid.”

Jimmy held his tongue while Fawkes gripped him tighter. “I get it, Fawkes. I’m pretending it doesn’t bother me.” He looked down the hall at all the carved snakes. “Whoa.”

“I know,” Harry softly said, looking around for any signs of recent life. “A lot of work for something he didn’t want anyone else to see.”

“This really is the Chamber of Secrets,” Jimmy said walking up to one of the hooded snake statues.

“And that really was a basilisk skin, so keep it down,” Harry said approaching the giant bust of Salazar himself. Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he hissed, “*Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four. Open your giant gaping maw, you bloated arrogant blowhard.*”

Jimmy was unable to contain the girlish shriek he let out when the mouth of the giant head started to open. He sprinted away to hide

around the nearest statue, closed his eyes, and assumed a fetal position.

Harry saw Jimmy dash around the corner and glanced into the opening of Slytherin's mouth. He quickly decided he'd seen enough.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god," Harry started chanting as he sprinted past where Jimmy was peeking between his fingers. "Run! Go! Green light!"

Jimmy shot to his feet and was sprinting with everything he had until he finally caught up with Harry, who turned to him and said, "Red light!" Harry skidded to a stop as Jimmy kept running.

Jimmy slowed down and turned around in confusion. He saw Harry leaning forward catching his breath. "What... what..."

"You've never played red light, green light?"

"What?"

"Just wanted to see if you were faster than me," Harry panted out. "You definitely are when you're scared, that's for sure."

"No monster?"

Harry shook his head. "Nah. It's gone. There's a layer of dust everywhere. It hasn't been here for years."

"Are you sure?" Jimmy asked carefully peering around Harry.

"Yup," Harry said. "I saw a spider in Salazar's giant nostril as it rose. No spider would be anywhere near a basilisk."

"Oh," Jimmy said, a little disappointed. "Is that it?"

"That's it."

"Huh," Jimmy said. "I was expecting more."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Harry agreed leading the way back out of the chamber. "Next time, near death. That's a promise."

Jimmy was beginning to feel the adrenaline leave his system and wasn't so sure how he felt about that promise. "You said something about payment?"

"Only the most valuable goods for this particular institution," Harry said. "Two bottles of firewhiskey and the last three issues of *Pumpin' Kin*."

Jimmy snickered as he stepped over the giant shed skin. He cast a pair of severing charms and grabbed himself a single scale as a souvenir. "I'll take the firewhiskey. You can keep the magazines."

"Are you sure?" Harry asked skeptically. "A male your age should never turn down porn. That's just unhealthy. If saucy pureblooded cousins aren't your thing-

"It's not that."

"You know there's blokes in there too," Harry explained. "I don't need to know nothing."

"Stop eyeing me Harry and no," Jimmy confidently ordered. "I don't need them because I got a subscription. There's a guy at the post office who forwards that stuff for a galleon."

Harry felt those brotherly feelings of pride stirring inside him. "Good work, kid. Good work." They reached the entrance again and Harry looked up. "You mind giving us a lift, Fawkes?"

Fawkes condescendingly glared at Harry.

"I've got a broom in case you were feeling moody," Harry explained. "I wasn't using you or forcing you to be our flying flaming mule."

Fawkes chirped and lifted Jimmy up into the air. Harry grabbed on as the phoenix flew them up and out of the tunnel.

Harry passed Jimmy the two shrunken bottles of firewhiskey and decided to forego the invisibility cloak. "Tell no one about this, got it?"

"I got it," Jimmy said confidently as they exited Myrtle's haunted bathroom. They'd walked about ten seconds before Fawkes hopped off Jimmy and onto Harry's shoulder.

Jimmy tentatively requested, "Can I... can I ask you something, Harry?"

"Sure," Harry said taking a right towards the library.

"Do you have the hots for my mum? Because it's never gonna happen."

Harry stumbled but regained his composure. "Good god, no. There is no chance in hell *that* would ever happen."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jimmy asked. "She's a very lovely witch."

"Stop and think about what you're arguing," Harry said patting him on the back to assure him. "Trust me. I'm as attracted to your mum as you are."

"Okay," Jimmy accepted, "creepy but okay. So then why the hell did you get that lovesick drooling idiot look when you met her? And why did she get it too?"

Harry got the feeling he was pretty much cementing his own special place in hell. "What can I say? It's not like I can turn this sex appeal off like a light. This body just looks good whether I want it to or not."

Jimmy cringed. "I'm sorry I asked."

The pair of young men and the phoenix walked back into the library and found the rest of their group.

"And this is the library," Jimmy instructed waving towards the stacks pretending to be a tour guide.

"What do you call these strange box shaped things?" Harry inquired.

"Those are called books."

“Books,” Harry repeated. “I’ve heard of those.”

“Harry,” Sirius pleadingly greeted. “You missed some absolutely enchanting stories.”

“Lord Harry Black,” Albus introduced. “I would like you to meet my Deputy Headmistress, Professor of Transfiguration, Minerva McGonagall.”

“Pleasure,” Harry said shaking his old Head of House’s hand.

“Sirius was asking some interesting questions about animagi forms,” Minerva said shaking his hand.

“Purely hypothetical, of course,” Harry said.

“I was just telling him about the common misconception that animagi forms are restricted to the animal world,” Minerva stated.

“I keep telling Sirius his form is probably a brick.”

“Hypothetically,” Sirius added.

“Hypothetically,” Harry agreed.

Minerva shook her head in amusement. “I have not heard of inanimate objects ever being an innate form, but there have been numerous insects and a few other magical entities that have taken the place of a more traditional form.”

“Well I was thinking of a real shiny brick,” Harry explained as if it would make a difference.

“Speaking of food,” Sirius said, “we about ready for dinner?” Sirius nodded to Harry and added, “I informed them that we had plans later this evening and would have to leave by nine.”

“Bricks make you think of food?” Jimmy asked when it seemed no one else was going to.

Sirius just nodded. “Dementors too.”

Harry nodded in understanding. "Yeah, Sirius' cooking is *really* bad."

"Why don't we head to my office and wait for the rest of our guests," Albus suggested. "I believe the Lupins and Mr. Potter are due any moment now."

"I cannot believe you!" Harry shouted at James Potter.

"No, no," James insisted. "You're not listening to me."

"Oh I hear the words coming out of your mouth, they just don't make any sense," Harry retorted.

"I can prove it to you," James argued, unaware his voice was getting louder.

"Gentlemen, please," Albus interjected trying to calm the two men down.

"Oh you think you can prove it?" Harry said looking his father up and down. "Even at your age?"

"Alright, that's it," James snapped throwing his napkin down and getting up. "Let's go. You and me. Right now."

"No!" Lily shouted over the two men. "We're trying to have a nice dinner here."

"Sorry, honey," James said dropping his head in respect.

"See?" Harry triumphantly exclaimed. "Even your wife knows the Hawkshead is an inherently flawed defensive formation."

"If the other team is doing any kind of looping," James continued in spite of Lily's protests, "then there's no way a Ploy is getting past and it eats up Parkin's Pincers like nobody's business."

Sirius sighed. He knew Harry and James were very different people. He knew Harry would rub James the wrong way just as he had

rubbed James the wrong way. And yet even still, two very different men could always find common ground arguing about Quidditch.

Rather than risk losing Harry, Sirius knew how to nip this discussion in the bud. "Personally, I like Quodpot better."

James stifled a gasp and looked right at Sirius, narrowing his eyes. "You would."

"Don't listen to him," Harry assured the others at dinner. "He doesn't like Quodpot better. He just doesn't want us talking about Quidditch."

"Thank you, Sirius," Lily said. "I'll have to remember that one."

Sirius saw Remus and Tonks were both enjoying his frustration. He figured he'd try and stir the pot some. "So Remus, how do you like working with the Weasley twins?" Sirius turned towards James as he explained, "You know, making a career of jokes and pranks."

Remus was amused as he looked between the two and answered. "It's actually very similar to any standard retail outlet. Fred and George have shrewd business acumen to go with their imaginations."

James looked inordinately pleased when that answer made Sirius frown.

"But it definitely is a lot more fun," Remus continued and saw Sirius grinning while James frowned. "And I've had some input on a few new ideas and a few improvements on old ideas that the twins have taken and run with. So keep your eyes out for the Moony line of mischief making."

Lily smiled and shook her head at her youngest son. "Something tells me you'll have some of his first products."

Jimmy didn't feel like mentioning that he frequently snuck out to Hogsmeade to visit Remus at work and just smiled innocently.

"Nothing I should be worried about I hope," Albus said looking towards Remus.

Remus shook his head. "Of course not, Headmaster. There's not a single one that's against the school rules."

"Yet," Tonks added as she finished off her chicken.

Albus gave up on subtlety and asked, "And what of our other guests? Were you a couple of merry pranksters in your youth? Something tells me if you two went to school together, you got into more than a small amount of trouble."

Harry turned to Sirius. "As much as you might like to think you look that young," Harry grinned. "I think it's that I look that old."

Sirius swatted at Harry's head and explained to Albus, "Believe it or not, I've got better than a decade on ickle Harrikins here and, yes I dabbled into the pranking arts a time or two."

"A decade, really?" James asked, knowing Albus was fishing for information. "So are you cousins or brothers? How are you related?"

Harry saw Sirius glance at him and answered with a grin, "I think brothers sounds pretty fitting, considering the family magic sees us both as Lords. And to answer your question, Albus, no. I wasn't big on pranking although I like to think I caused my fair share of havoc in school."

Tonks began to choke on her water and Remus had to pat her on the back as she coughed.

"An understatement, perhaps," Albus said. "You know in his day, James here was quite the prankster."

James Potter this time began to choke on his drink. Sirius could not have been smiling wider if he tried.

"Oh yes," Albus continued watching both Harry and Sirius very closely. "James, Remus, and your cousin of the same name, Sirius, were quite the troublemakers."

“Really?” Sirius said turning towards James. “I’d love to hear about them. I’ve gotten some stories about Sirius from Remus, but I’d imagine as Headmaster you’d offer a unique perspective.”

“We don’t need to go down that road,” James interceded.

“Oh but we want to,” Sirius replied with a sickeningly sweet smile.

“Harry,” Jimmy whispered. “Harry,” he tried again as he poked Harry in the side.

Harry snapped out of his momentary daze and turned to the Head Boy. “Hmm?”

“You were staring again,” Jimmy explained.

“I was not,” Harry whispered back despite knowing he had been. He leaned back as Lily Potter leaned forward across the table towards him.

“Can I talk to you?” Lily asked softly. “Privately?”

Harry glanced over to see James was cringing while Albus was recounting an old prank of the Marauders. He motioned to Sirius that he was going to step out, before he answered Lily. “Yeah, sure.”

Lily stood and set her napkin down. “If you’ll excuse us for just a moment.”

Harry shrugged indicating he wasn’t sure what this was about and followed her out of the chamber and into the Headmaster’s office.

“Two things,” Lily began.

Harry looked at all the portraits pretending to be snoozing and interrupted her. “You mind if we go for a walk or something? I always feel like I’m in trouble with fifty or so old Headmasters watching me.”

Lily saw the portraits all turn away or huff, despite pretending to be asleep. “Yeah, I know what you mean.” She led him out the office and down the stairs. “Two things,” she began again. “First is... I’m not

sure how to put this delicately so I'm just going to say it. Are you *trying* to bewitch me?"

Harry winced having expected this. "Nope. Not trying to bewitch you. Why do you ask?"

Lily led them down towards an empty classroom that had a view of the lake. She walked over to the open window where she could feel the evening breeze. "I don't know. But you stir up all kinds of strange feelings inside me."

Harry knew he was risking becoming a target for indoor lightning but still said, "You're a married woman, Mrs. Potter."

Lily frowned in irritation. "I didn't mean it like that."

Harry continued wincing inwardly and asked, "How did you mean it then?"

Lily sighed and looked out the window. "You know exactly what I'm talking about. I've seen the way you act and you're feeling it too."

"I'm not sure what you're-"

"A mother knows these things," Lily interrupted him, not noticing Harry's brief look of fear. "Raise a couple of kids and your bullshit detector will get finely honed."

Harry quickly tried to mask his emotions when he realized Lily was speaking of her two children.

"This thing," Lily said motioning between herself and Harry. "That you obviously don't want to talk about. You know what it is?"

Harry was keeping his distance from her, hoping it would mute the effects. "I, uhh, I may have a theory."

Lily looked at Harry. "Would you care to share this theory?"

"I'd rather not."

"Tell me your theory."

“Okay,” Harry conceded. “Well,” Harry knew she wasn’t his mother, but it still felt wrong outright lying to her. He was just hoping to not set off her bullshit detector. “I think it means... you’re a really good parent.”

“What?” Lily asked in confusion.

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat. “It means you’re very in touch with your maternal instincts or extrasensory perception. You’re very affectionate, caring, and understanding.”

“I’m a married woman, Lord Black,” Lily interrupted with a grin.

“Right,” Harry said feeling perfectly comfortable, just merely drowning in surreal guilt. “It’s this study... that I read... in some healer’s office.”

“Who?”

“Vandelay,” Harry answered immediately. “Art Vandelay.”

Lily nodded, storing the name in her memory. “I’ve never heard of Healer Vandelay.”

“Oh he’s not the... It wasn’t his office, I mean.” Harry was making nervous hand gestures. “He did the study that I read. And it was his research on magical bonds that... led to my theory.”

“I’m listening,” Lily urged.

“I don’t remember the exact wording,” Harry continued. “But the gist was that whenever a magical mother gives birth to a magical baby, the bonds of gestation remain in a unique magical connection.”

“Uh-huh,” Lily nodded.

“Yeah,” Harry said, finally accepting that he’d lied so much today that it really shouldn’t matter if he lied for the rest of the night. “It’s how witches know exactly what their babies need, when to feed them, all of that... it’s just a big magical umbilical cord.”

“Really,” Lily asked skeptically.

"Yup," Harry said. "But it's invisible. Undetectable even." Harry was nodding more than was healthy. "Invisible and undetectable."

"A great big invisible-"

"And undetectable," Harry added in with a smile.

"And undetectable... magical umbilical cord."

Harry nodded.

Lily briefly thought back to her first baby that was taken from her and tried to imagine what he would look like if he were still alive today. She was attempting to reconcile the image in her head with the young man across from her but she was unable. "Do you think I'm your mother?"

Harry shook his head vigorously. "No, no. You misunderstand. I wasn't saying my great big invisible undetectable magical umbilical cord is connected to you. The point was... I mean...Part of Vandelay's study was on how that bond deteriorates through time. He had a section that I found especially interesting on how orphans, separated from their parents at a young age, get that link severed, and for that reason it doesn't deteriorate."

"Okay," Lily said, following this strange explanation.

"This is how many good parents, or mothers who have been mothers many times over, can just sense or spot an orphan."

Lily nodded finding herself agreeing with this.

"I've been an orphan since I was one, so I've got this invisible magical umbilical cord flying and flailing all around me."

"Is this like your arms thing?"

"Kind of," Harry nodded. "But no. The arm thing is unique to me as far as I know. Orphans everywhere are just spraying invisible undetectable... orphan juice... all around them."

Lily put a hand on Harry to stop him. "Do you need a hug?"

Harry was immensely grateful that she seemed to be buying this and was going to say no when his mouth opened and out came, "Okay."

Harry sighed happily as Lily wrapped her arms around him and hugged him. He knew he didn't deserve this considering the crock of shit he was feeding her, but he wasn't going to pass on the opportunity.

Lily didn't mind the foreign entity furiously writhing inside her so much and sat back in the windowsill. "So I'm just a really good parent?"

Harry felt happy that he'd stolen a hug and got right back into his lies. "Well yes and no."

"Hmm?"

"Discussing my theory out loud just now," Harry continued. "I've been refining it some. And I realized that severing the invisible and undetectable magical umbilical cord would go both ways."

"Oh," Lily said realizing where Harry was going.

Harry nodded. "And since you lost your son when he was so young and the bond was strong, you've got one flying and flailing around too. Spraying your own... juice."

Lily's face saddened as she was once again reminded of the child she lost.

"And I'm guessing having Sarah and Jimmy helped settle it down some, but it'll probably always be there to some degree looking for... Harry."

Lily looked over at Harry with tears in her eyes. "So you do feel it as well."

Harry bit his lip and thought he'd mix in some truth. "I doubt what I feel is the same thing you do, but yeah, I feel it."

"What does it feel like to you?" Lily asked earnestly.

Harry took a deep breath and admitted, "Whenever you're near, or when I see you, I can't help but to think about my own mother. And the life with her that I missed out on."

"Oh you poor thing," Lily said getting up and opening her arms. "Give me another hug."

"Okay," Harry softly agreed, embracing his near mother once more.

Lily let out a pleased sigh and wiped her eyes dry. "Come on. We should get back before they send out a search party."

Harry got up and followed her out of the classroom and back towards the Headmaster's office. "You said there were two things?"

"Hmm?"

"At the start, you said there were two things. What was the second?"

"Oh," Lily said with a mischievous smile. "The other was that you have something in your teeth. Go like this." She made a show of rubbing her front top incisors.

Harry did as she asked.

"You got it," Lily agreed and resumed her walk towards the gargoyle guarding the stairs. She stood the side and waved Harry on the revolving staircase first. She followed behind him and just before Harry entered the side dining chamber Lily stopped him. "Oh and Harry?"

Harry stopped and turned to Lily.

"Someday," Lily said with a firm nod. "I want the truth." She patted Harry on the cheek and walked back into the dining area. "Sorry about that. Have we missed dessert?"

Harry walked back in and took his seat in between Sirius and Jimmy.

"Everything okay?" Sirius asked looking at Harry.

Harry couldn't keep the smile off his face. "Yup." He turned towards the other guests and asked, "What are we talking about?"

"James here," Remus happily summarized, "was telling us all about how close he is to nabbing the Death Eater Bandits."

"Really?" Harry drew out the word in exaggeration. "I've read about them in the paper. What can you tell me?"

James rolled his eyes. "The Daily Prophet has been practically declaring them heroes, as if being the target of a burglar was proof that the victim is a Death Eater."

"Not true?" Harry asked curiously.

James shrugged. "From what I can tell, it's very possible they have all been Death Eaters. But the ones we'd ask are all conveniently out of town and often their neighbors, servants, or wives are the ones who report the robberies."

"And you think you may be close to catching the Bandits? Or is it Bandit? How many are there?"

"The wand signatures are all over the place and those are never unique enough to catch someone, but we think there are at least two different people," James said. "And Albus, I didn't mention this to you, but I think the Bandits might have been in our home."

"Godric's Hollow?" Albus asked curiously. "Did they take anything?"

James shook his head. "That's just it. Nothing was taken but they left the family safe wide open, like a warning."

"Hey!" Jimmy perked up. "I got punished for that."

"No, you argued your way out of punishment," Lily corrected.

Jimmy frowned. "Well you made me feel guilty about it."

James shook his head and explained, "My belief is that they broke in, opened the safe, and then... something happened. Something that

angered them about Death Eaters or maybe they'd thought I was a Death Eater and suddenly realized I wasn't. Either way, it had to have been a Potter who opened that safe or else someone with a lot of talent for breaking into things."

"Can't it be both?" Tonks said mischievously.

"You know we should probably get going," Sirius said loudly.

"Yes, we should," Harry agreed standing up quickly. "Thank you all for a lovely dinner."

"I'm sorry Sarah wasn't able to join us," Lily said. "We should do this again some time."

"Our schedules can be pretty hectic," Harry responded in an effort to avoid answering.

"I need a quick word with you," Tonks said waving them away.

"Thanks again," Sirius said as he followed Harry and Tonks out the side chamber.

Tonks waited until they were away from the portraits and whispered into Harry's ear, "I think the Unspeakables know something. They didn't even care that all of the leads I followed on the mysterious large breasted blonde woman were dead ends. It's like they knew they would be."

"You think you're going to get into trouble?" Harry whispered back and looked at her curiously.

Tonks shrugged off his concern. "Just giving my Lords a heads up."

Harry and Sirius said their goodbyes to Tonks and walked the path down to Hogsmeade, aiming for the Hog's Head.

"Did you come through on your side of the bet?" Harry asked.

"Of course," Sirius replied, glancing briefly behind him and pulling out a small device from his pocket. "I nicked this thing off his shelf."

Harry looked at the small contraption. "You stole his Put-Outer?"

Sirius frowned and looked at the little clicker. "I thought it was called a Deluminator."

"Don't be facetious."

"Well what did you snag, oh high and mighty one?"

Harry reached into a hidden pocket and pulled out a ratty hat. "This."

Sirius looked at it in shock. "The Sorting Hat! You stole the Sorting Hat?"

"You think he'll notice?"

"You can't steal the Sorting Hat. That's just... no. Uh-uh. Foul. Against the rules."

Harry laughed and vanished the hat. "Relax. I was kidding. I didn't steal the Sorting Hat, but I'm not going to pull out what I did grab."

"Well then you lose," Sirius triumphantly announced.

"Here," Harry said, pulling open a hidden flap. "This is what I actually grabbed."

A muffled voice could be heard coming from a portrait that had been crammed into a tight space. "This is illegal! You won't get away with this!"

"You stole a portrait?" Sirius asked semi-impressed.

"Phineas Nigellus portrait to be exact," Harry said. "And I replaced it with an identical empty frame."

"You mean..."

Harry nodded. "We get a little loyalty out of him, transfer him into a different frame, one that's linked to the one currently hanging in Dumbledore's office, and we'll have our own personal spy into the heart of Hogwarts."

“And not bound by the usual Headmaster portrait rules,” Sirius agreed. “That’s good. But mine was still better.”

“Your Put-Outer?”

“It’s a Deluminator!”

“Fine,” Harry sighed. “Since I’m better than you at everything else, I suppose I can be humbler and let you pretend you won this time. I’ll buy drinks.”

“Thank you,” Sirius agreed. “Besides, you didn’t have to listen to the unabridged history of the suit of armor near the owlery. Twenty minutes on a suit of armor!”

They walked into the Hog’s Head and waved at Gin behind the bar. “Don’t get too drunk,” Harry whispered. “We’ve got work to do tonight.”

Harry looked back towards the small ash wand on the other side of the ward set. “Dammit.”

“We’ll get it on the way back,” Sirius assured him.

“I know,” Harry agreed. “Give me your unicorn hair wand. It’s better than nothing.”

“Okay,” Sirius agreed handing it over. “But it doesn’t like you.”

“No wands like me,” Harry grumbled.

“Well maybe if you hadn’t overloaded and exploded your first one...”

“Shut up,” Harry said. “And flood the next anchor.”

Sirius bent down to one knee and funneled his magic into the stone. The wards flared up to life and Harry used several magical arms with ward stones to open a hole big enough to step through.

“So Remus says the *Parselcrotch* shirts are selling more than all our other shirts combined,” Sirius said calmly making conversation as Harry climbed through the hole.

Harry pulled his ward hole over towards Sirius and let him step through. “You’ve got to let that go. There’s no shame in being worse than me at something.”

Sirius frowned as he let the funneling stop and Harry pulled his ward hole back with him.

“Or everything I guess when you really think about it,” Harry said as they turned towards the next ward set.

“No one likes a braggart,” Sirius grumbled raising his wand to the wards.

“Wait!” Harry stopped him. “Look closer. There’s two there.”

Sirius squinted. “Can we do both at once?”

Harry considered it and said, “It’ll be easier to do them separately.”

“Can you make us some space?”

Harry shook his head. “Nope. They’re linked in multiple spots.” Harry aimed Sirius’ wand at himself and thought better of it. “You shrink me. Your wand doesn’t like me that much.”

Sirius cast a shrinking charm on Harry first and then himself. The small gap between the two linked wards was now plenty of space for their relative size.

“Can you lift the first one?” Sirius asked getting closer to the ward.

“Yup,” Harry said pulling out his ward-jack. He slid the metal slat through and began to pump it up and down. The edge of the ward lifted out of the ground and was slowly ratcheted up. “Second one won’t stop animagi.”

"Can we lift it?" Sirius asked as he slid under the first ward's edge and stopped across from the next.

Harry crawled under the edge and spun the ward-jack around. He let the first ward fall and withdrew the ward-jack. He looked closer at the next one. "Not from this side."

"That's what I figured," Sirius said. "And I'm not sure I can carry the jack through."

"Stick it in a bubble," Harry said. "Your wand too."

"I transform with my wand," Sirius argued.

"I know you can," Harry said. "But better safe than sorry."

"Alright," Sirius said accepting the magic-muting ball with the expanded space inside. He stripped off all of his magical possessions and loaded them and the ward-jack into the ball. With a pop, Sirius had transformed into his dog form and picked up the sealed magic-muting bubble in his mouth. He glanced up at Harry, saw his godson nod, and trotted straight through the ward. Right as he crossed it, the ward flared to life momentarily.

"Whoa," Harry said.

Sirius dropped the bubble from the other side and transformed back. "What was that? Did it trigger?"

Harry shook his head. "No, it didn't trigger but something reacted."

"Are we screwed?" Sirius asked warily.

"I... I don't think so," Harry slowly answered. "But let's take a moment here. Do you see anything from your side?"

Sirius opened up the bubble and withdrew his wand and the jack. He charmed his omnioculars and peered through them. "It looks standard from this side."

Harry frowned. "Yeah, same here. Which worries me."

“Want me to try and jack it?”

“No,” Harry said. “Not yet. There’s more to this ward than meets the eye which means we need to be careful.”

“You know this would be so much easier if you just learned the animagus transformation.”

“Good thinking, Padfoot. Let me go grab a book and start studying right now.”

Sirius looked closer at the ward. “No anchor stone, right?”

“Right.”

“And it didn’t react to me, only the bubble right?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Sirius saw Harry was thinking deeply and left him to it.

After a minute or two of silence, Harry asked, “Any ideas?”

Sirius looked at Harry and gulped in surprise. “Uhh... Harry?”

“What?” Harry said. He then noticed Sirius looked smaller. “Why are you shrinking?”

Sirius shook his head. “I’m not shrinking, Harry. You’re getting bigger.”

“What?” Harry said noticing the wards behind him and in front of him were much closer. “Ah crap. Why didn’t you cast a stronger shrinking charm?”

“I cast a fine shrinking charm,” Sirius defended. “You were the one who said we shouldn’t take Norton’s.”

“Albus would’ve spotted it right away,” Harry said. He stood up straighter as the two ward walls began to close in on him. “And we’ve got more pressing issues right now.”

“Alright I’m jacking it,” Sirius said moving for the ward-jack.

Harry feared what that might do to the ward but was running out of options. He tried to cast a shrinking charm on himself with Sirius’ wand. He shrunk slightly, but the excess magic flared from the wand dangerously nearly triggering both wards. “Okay do it. But do it quick.”

Sirius slid the ward-jack right through and began to ratchet as fast as he could. “Dammit, Harry. Stop growing.”

“Hurry,” Harry pleaded using his invisible arms to put slight pressure on both sides of the rapidly approaching wards.

Sirius huffed. “Those wards aren’t fatal, right?”

Harry sighed as he was now forced straight up and lacked the room to even turn around. “They both look like lockdown, but this one in front we know is a wild card.”

“Fuck,” Sirius swore knowing that lockdown would mean they could easily be trapped inside the wards. “That’s as high as the jack will go. Apparition, portkey, anything?”

“No, those wards are all solid. Dammit,” Harry swore as he felt both wards pushing on his back and front. “If I even bend my knees, we’ll probably get locked in.”

“Do something!”

“I’m thinking, I’m thinking,” Harry pleaded as the wards pushed tighter as the shrinking charm on him continued to slowly wear off. He was now more than three times as tall as Sirius.

“Fuck, fuck,” Sirius was chanting as he saw the wards pushing and bending around Harry’s growing form.

“Ahh,” Harry groaned under the weight.

“Ahh!” Sirius was shouting with him. “Just... just... I don’t know.”

"I can't," Harry whispered unable to fight the wards pull. He grunted, kept his eyes closed, and silently pleaded for help.

Sirius raised his wand, prepared to simply obliterate every ward around them. "Shield yourself with your arms!"

"They're all that's been keeping the wards off me so far. I can't even move them," Harry wheezed. "I just..."

"Hang on," Sirius said looking around wildly. He finally decided to aim off to the side of Harry and focused his thoughts on the mysterious ward. "*Avada Ke-*"

And then it happened.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"*Avada Ke-HOLY CRAP!*" Sirius' wand fizzled as the unfinished spell went nowhere.

"Ahh!" Harry was exclaiming as he clenched his eyes shut and kept growing closer to normal size. "Ahh... ahh... uh?" He trailed off as he opened up his eyes and saw the wards passing harmlessly through his suddenly translucent body. "This is new."

Sirius lowered his wand and stared up at the semi-transparent ghostly form of his godson. "Harry! Oh god, Harry. I'm sorry."

"I'm not dead," Harry replied back to the still tiny Sirius. Harry waved his transparent hand and arm through the wards without even feeling a tingle. "Am I?"

"What the hell happened?" Sirius asked stepping back from the ward before he countered the shrinking charm on himself. "You're a ghost!"

"That couldn't have killed me," Harry said frowning. He was poking himself and saw his body reacted normally to his own touch. "There's no way."

Sirius reached forward and his hand passed right through Harry's arm. "You're cold."

Harry stepped towards Sirius and swung his arms through his godfather touching nothing.

Sirius shivered at the sensation. "What did you do? Accidental magic?"

Harry scratched his ghostly head. "I've never heard of anything like this. I mean I was trying to think of ways around the wards and pleading for help. The only thing I could think of was with the animagi ward in front of me-

Sirius gasped and stepped back.

“What?” Harry said looking down and turning around. “What’d I do now?”

“That’s it!” Sirius exclaimed. “That’s what... oh this makes perfect sense!”

“What does?”

“You’re a ghost!”

“But I never died.”

“No, no,” Sirius corrected. “You’re a ghost! Your animagus form is *dead Harry!*”

Harry frowned. “That’s not a form.”

“I told you, you killed your form,” Sirius cheered. “That’s why the mist was grey and you kept seeing yourself hazy. You’re a bloody ghost!”

“But that doesn’t...” Harry stopped. “I mean that... I couldn’t... My animagus form is a ghost?”

“McGonagall was even talking about magical entities other than animals,” Sirius happily continued. “Ghosts are all in-between and that’s why you didn’t get black or white mist. That’s why you were sometimes invisible. Oh this is so freaking cool.”

“But I still look like me,” Harry pondered.

Sirius shrugged. “You’re wearing the same clothes but you look like a ghost to me.”

Harry walked right up to the next set of wards and slowly stuck his arm straight through them. “This is sweet! Hardly anyone wards against ghosts.”

“Oh come on,” Sirius grumbled. “That’s cheating.”

Harry got down on his hands and knees and submerged his head down into the ground without interference. There was a brief beat before his head came right back up. “That was unpleasant.”

"It hurt?"

"No," Harry said shaking his head. "But it looked like dirt mashed up to my eyelids."

"What were you expecting?"

"I'm not sure," Harry said rubbing his ghostly eyes. "But I definitely cannot see through solid objects."

"Why would you think you could?"

Harry frowned. "Well pardon me if I'm not exactly experienced at being a ghost. Can they even pick things up?" Harry asked while trying to grab the grass and ground below him.

Sirius shook his head. "Poltergeists can, but I don't think ghosts can do all that much."

"But I'm sitting on the ground," Harry said. "And I was walking on it earlier."

Sirius shrugged. "Are you sure that's what you were doing?"

Harry jumped to his feet and walked over to Sirius. "Yes, Padfoot, I'm walking on the ground."

"You could just be floating in the way normal Harry would expect to walk. Try and float off the ground," Sirius suggested urging his godson on.

Harry figured it was worth a shot. His face tightened into a look of concentration but nothing was happening. He sighed. He stuck a fist into the air and jumped up, only to land right back on the ground. "Is there a manual for this stuff?"

Sirius grinned as a thought came to him. "Well, you could always ask-

"OH! MY! GOD!" Harry exclaimed in sheer terror. "Oh crap. Oh Jesus fucking Christ."

“Just remembered her, eh?”

“I swear to all that’s fucking holy, Sirius,” Harry snapped, stomping right up into the elder man’s face. “If you breathe one word of this to Ginny, just one word, I’m carving out your testicles with a melon-baller.”

“She’s bound to find out eventu-”

“No she isn’t!” Harry shouted. “You’re not hearing me too clearly. She will NEVER find out about this.”

“Harry-”

“NEVER!”

Sirius just started to laugh at Harry.

Harry would catch Sirius’ eye and the older man would just laugh harder.

Harry sighed. “She’s right behind me, isn’t she?”

Sirius just laughed louder at the depressed look of resignation on Harry’s face.

Harry slowly turned around. He kept turning until he had gone in a full circle and was back facing Sirius. Harry fell to the ground in a mixture of exhaustion and exultation. He put his hand over his chest. “I think I had a heart attack,” Harry opened his eyes in surprise and began to rhythmically push on his chest. “Though I would feel more comforted if I actually had a heartbeat.”

Sirius just continued to laugh at Harry and was pointing at him.

“What?” Harry finally asked, thinking Sirius was laughing a bit too heartily.

“You did all the animagus exercises, right? The preliminary study?”

“Yeah,” Harry nodded having gone through them with Hermione.

“Alright then,” Sirius happily responded. “Tell me, what’s the first step towards transformation after you’ve identified your form?”

“You have to map out the skeletal structure differences and then... musculature...” Harry trailed off and suddenly realized. “Oh.”

Sirius started laughing again.

“Ah crud.”

Sirius was nodding in mirth.

“None of those exercises are going to help,” Harry realized. “My structure is the exact same... I... How the hell do I transform?”

Sirius was still tickled and knew there was one more realization still to come for Harry.

Harry’s ghostly form managed to pale even further. He gasped, “How do I change back?”

“There it is,” Sirius gleefully announced.

“I might as well be dead,” Harry mumbled remembering the horror stories of inexperienced animagi getting stuck in their forms. “*And I’m getting hungry.*”

“Relax Harry,” Sirius assured him. “I can fetch Moony and we can reverse it forcefully. I think.”

Harry exhaled in relief despite not really breathing. “That’s right. You’re going to have to teach me that spell. I get the feeling I’m going to need it.”

“I could try it on my own,” Sirius admitted. “But that’s not an easy one-person job, and you’re not exactly a weak wizard.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, we’ll do that but before we do, you’ve got some work to finish.”

“Aww man,” Sirius grumbled. “Now I’ve got to do everything myself.”

“Quit your whining,” Harry happily scolded. “There’s just one more ward set and it’s liftable.”

Sirius nodded his assent and brought the ward-jack over to the final inner ward set. He slid it in and began ratcheting it up while Harry walked on into the mid-sized house.

“You could at least keep me company,” Sirius muttered.

“I’m scouting ahead,” Harry called back. “I can tell you where to go.”

Sirius was down on his knees, silently agreeing with Harry but electing not to voice it. He glanced back through the illusionary veil protecting them from outsiders and saw no one had snuck up on them. He laid down on the ground and rolled underneath the final ward set once it was high enough.

He left the ward jimmied up and drew his original wand as he walked up to the front door of the house. “Harry?”

Harry stepped right through the wall to the side of the door. “There’s not a lot. But I found something we’ll want to take.”

“Just one?” Sirius said slipping on an unlocking glove and opening the front door.

“One in particular,” Harry corrected. “There may be a few other things worth our time.”

“Let’s get this over with,” Sirius said looking both directions in the sub-standard home they were robbing. “I’m feeling a little vulnerable being the only one between the two of us who can die at the moment.”

“Follow me,” Harry said leading Sirius towards the back of the home. “There are wards over it that are masked themselves.”

Sirius found it humorous that Harry as a ghost still had to walk everywhere. “Are you sure this is the right guy and right place?”

"I had a snake confirm the Dark Mark, and Bellatrix says he's an obedient Death Eater and has been for a couple decades," Harry said pointing over his shoulder. "It's the blank patch of wall here."

Sirius eyes slid right over the area Harry indicated, feeling a strong urge to look elsewhere. "It's just most places we rob are a lot nicer than ours. And this place doesn't feel like the type owned by a lowlife with a vault full of gold to fall back on."

"Well I'm not sure how much in here would be worth fencing anyways," Harry shrugged. "I just want what's back there."

Sirius' line of sight slipped right over the wall again. "Can you at least turn around and point it out?"

Harry shook his head. "Nope, I can't."

Sirius looked at Harry curiously.

"The same protections that are making your eyes slide all over the place work on me too," Harry explained. "But I think I know a way around them."

"I'm listening."

"Turn towards the wall on the right," Harry instructed. "Now walk sideways, keep watching the wall in front of you. Okay... stop."

Sirius stopped and was looking at the wall, knowing he shouldn't turn around yet.

"Wait for my signal. There are some strong befuddlement hexes in here backed with compulsion charms. It wouldn't take much to... get..." Harry said stepping backwards towards the wall. He glanced over his shoulder and was hit by the compulsion. Harry's ghostly form turned and started to walk down the hallway.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?" Harry answered turning around. "What's up?"

Sirius turned just slightly to see a completely oblivious Harry standing at the end of the hallway before whipping his head right back towards the wall in front of him. "You're such an idiot."

"And you're a wanker."

Sirius turned enough so that he could glare at Harry.

"What did I do?" Harry said, glancing to the wall behind Sirius. "You know there's some wards behind you."

"You don't say," Sirius grumbled. "Come on Harry. Think it through."

Harry glanced at Sirius and then saw his vision slide from the warded section of wall. "We're trying to get in there, aren't we?"

"Yes," Sirius exasperatedly agreed.

"And I got hit by its defenses and that's why I'm standing over here," Harry said in dawning realization.

Sirius nodded eagerly.

"I'm coming," Harry said, turning sideways to avoid looking at the wall. He slid over next to Sirius. "I'm good. So what's the plan?"

Sirius resisted the urge to bang his head against the wall. "You came up with the plan. You hadn't gotten around to sharing it with me."

"Well that explains why your panties are in a bunch," Harry said. He looked at the wall where Sirius was staring and began to step backwards. "Let me try something."

"Can you at least tell me what you're doing so I can remind you next time?" Sirius asked without turning around. "Harry? Harry!"

"I'm here," Harry said stepping right behind Sirius. "I got a plan. Might even be the same one as first time, I just can't look at it from this side." He stuck his hand right in front of Sirius' face. "See my hand?"

Sirius flinched at the hand in his face at first but leaned back and looked at Harry's translucent hand. "Yup."

“Get it in your mind and keep it there,” Harry said as he began to step backwards. He waited until he was all the way in the wall before he located the hidden shelf. He stuck his hand straight through the wall, sticking out into the hallway while making sure his body stayed inside the wall. “Now Sirius, keep thinking about my hand. Whenever you’re ready, you whip around and hit my hand with a blasting curse. Don’t think of anything other than my hand, alright?”

Sirius spun around and sent a sharp *reducto* straight through Harry’s hand, blowing away a large chunk of the very near wall.

Harry shrieked and jumped backward at the sudden explosion, but was pleased to see Sirius looking at him through the large hole in the wall.

“You okay?”

Harry nodded while rubbing his eyes. “Man being a ghost is killer on the eyes.”

Sirius grinned. “So what do we got in here?” He lifted a few chunks of plaster and wood away revealing a relatively plain box that had been charmed indestructible.

“That’s it,” Harry said pointing at the box. “That’s what makes hitting this place worthwhile.”

Sirius opened the box and saw a gold locket with the letter S engraved on it. “Is this magical?”

“Salazar Slytherin’s locket?” Harry explained. “Yeah, I’d say so.”

Sirius lifted it up to better examine it. “This is Slytherin’s?”

Harry nodded.

“Just holding it gives me the heebie-jeebies,” Sirius said putting it back in the box, and getting ready to put it in his trunk.

“Don’t take the box,” Harry stopped him. “I know we can remove most tracers and mask others but this wasn’t protected by amateurs.”

"Fine," Sirius said pulling out the magic muting ball and slipping the locket into it. "But I'm not leaving here empty-handed."

"There's a closet with clothes about your size," Harry suggested.

"This is not the home of a man with taste," Sirius snootily retorted. "No, I want that," He finished and pointed down the hall.

Harry stepped out from the wall and saw where Sirius was pointing. "That?"

"Yup," Sirius assured him.

"Do you even know what that is?"

"Not exactly," Sirius said. "But it's big. And I want it."

"That's a washer/dryer combo, Padfoot."

"I still want it."

Harry looked at his godfather curiously. "Do you even know what a-"

"Yes," Sirius answered before Harry could finish asking. "When I was a kid and my little brother was still a baby, the nanny would give him fresh sheets from a muggle dryer. They always smelled better and were warmer than magicked ones. As soon as she left the room, I'd steal his warm sheets and give him my old ones."

Harry looked at Sirius oddly. "That's beautiful, Sirius."

"Little bugger used to cry and cry every time I did it," Sirius explained. "Regulus once told me that was his first memory."

"You were quite the brother."

"Yeah, I went through a bit of bedwetting stage too, so it was a win-win situation."

"How did Regulus win?"

"He didn't," Sirius said with a frown. "I won twice."

“Go shrink your washer/dryer combo,” Harry said with a shake of his head. “And do you want to portkey or apparate out of here?”

“Why not just go back the way we came?” Sirius asked as he wiggled the metal appliance taller than him away from the wall.

“Because I don’t trust that unknown ward, and we can take the portkey and apparition down from inside.”

“Portkey then,” Sirius said as he shrunk the machine down. “I can transform and take a portkey.”

“Go to Moony’s and fetch him,” Harry said. “And I’ll meet you where we did our scouting from, up the hill.”

Sirius finished storing away the washer/dryer combo and began checking the closets and hallways as he walked back towards the front. “You can’t do anything as a ghost, can you?”

“To the best of my knowledge ghosts can’t apparate or take portkeys,” Harry explained in frustration. “And I don’t particularly want to walk ten kilometers to a bus station.”

Sirius kept looking for plunder as Harry directed him towards the anchor stones for the portkey ward. “Still haven’t figured out invisibility or floating?”

Harry shook his head. “I’ve no clue.”

Sirius had quietly brought down the portkey ward and resumed his haphazard search for things to take. He decided there wasn’t anything else worth stealing and walked out to retrieve the ward-jack he had left out front. He stuffed everything into the magic muting ball that he transfigured to look like a chew toy. He cast the ‘After Dark Mark’ just inside the front door before turning a twig into a portkey to the wooded area across the street from Remus’ place.

Harry waved at Sirius as he popped into his dog form. “Don’t make me wait too long.”

Sirius picked up the ball in his mouth and stepped onto the spelled twig, disappearing from Alan Weston's front porch.

Harry continued to try and move solid objects in spite of his incorporeal state but failed. He walked over to where he'd left his wand and was disappointed to see he couldn't do anything with it either.

He felt exposed out in the open and unable to do anything. He quickly walked up the hillside to the spot where he would wait for Sirius and Remus.

Harry sighed hoping against hope that Ginny wouldn't make an appearance before the two older Marauders could arrive. He plopped down onto the ground and leaned back against a young tree.

Harry's back started to itch when he remembered he should not have been able to lean against a tree. Harry's subconscious appeared to be having a laugh and when that thought crossed his mind, he fell backwards through the tree.

Harry leaned up on his elbows and saw the thin trunk was coming out his stomach. "Lovely," he muttered as he laid back down, resigned to waiting.

Harry wasn't sure how long he lay there looking as if he fell from the sky and got skewered by the tree. He'd been trying to think of all the disadvantages of his animagus form when he heard Remus' voice, "What do you think would happen if we cast the spell right now?"

Harry quickly rolled to his side, not even wanting to give them the opportunity. "Don't even joke about that. I'm already dancing a fine line of death here."

"A ghost," Remus said shaking his head. "That's... freaky."

"I didn't even get a girlish shriek or a gasp that I might be dead?" Harry asked dusting himself off out of habit.

"Oh, he shrieked," Sirius happily explained. "We were silenced as we walked up ensuring Moony didn't wake the neighbors."

“That was hardly a shriek,” Remus argued.

“Come on,” Harry said urging the men on. “Hit me with your best shot. And we can pretend you already cast the fake spell tricking me into thinking I was stuck as a ghost. I broke down, I cried. You laughed at me and are now going to cast the real spell. Go.”

Sirius put his hands on his hips. “This is why no one likes you even though we pretend we do.”

“Forget it, Padfoot,” Remus chided. “Let’s just do this and *leave the scene of the crime*. Please.”

Remus and Sirius moved into position and cast the animagus reversal spell at the same time.

Harry stood there and felt the spells connecting with him. He tried to relax and urge the spell on, but his magic was instinctively resisting it. Finally with a bit of push from the two spell-casters, Harry felt momentarily like a balloon pumped past its limit and with a pop was suddenly corporeal again.

“Thanks guys,” Harry said, surprised that the transformation hadn’t hurt more.

Sirius and Remus dropped their wand arms in exhaustion. Sirius complained, “I don’t remember it being that difficult back in school.”

Harry still had Sirius’ unicorn hair wand and simply summoned his own unicorn hair wand from where he stood, having already confirmed the two outer sets wouldn’t trigger. He snagged the wand out of the air as sure as if it were a snitch, and tossed the other wand to Sirius. “You guys okay to apparate?”

“I’ve been doing all the work tonight,” Sirius tiredly complained. “Give us a lift.”

Harry saw Remus looked as beat as Sirius and grabbed onto both of them as he apparated to Diagon Alley. The three men quickly walked into the Leaky Cauldron and flooed back to Grimmauld Place.

"I suppose we owe you an explanation," Harry said as Remus dusted the soot off himself.

"Save it for tomorrow," Remus said turning to walk down the hall. "I'm going back to bed."

Harry saw Remus head towards Bellatrix's room and turned to Sirius. "He wasn't at home, was he?"

"Nope," Sirius said. "Didn't you wonder why it took me so long?"

"I figured you were just making me sweat."

Sirius rocked his hand from side to side. "Maybe a little. But it was also because I walked in on Bellatrix extracting the baby batter. You know the Lord stuff is awful useful in this place when it comes to locked doors."

Harry winced at the imagery. "I'm sure Remus was happy about that."

"He was more scared than anything when he noticed me," Sirius happily admitted. "It took him over five minutes to even realize I was there."

Harry blinked at the implications of that innocuous comment. "They didn't notice you?"

"Bellatrix saw me walk in. She waved. I wasn't in any hurry."

"You're a sick man."

"Yes Harry," Sirius agreed. "I am at that."

Harry saw the calm acceptance on Sirius' face. "Can I get that locket?"

"We're not going to sell it tomorrow?"

"Nope," Harry told him. "We can't sell that thing. I'm going to put it behind a Fidelius before I go to bed."

Sirius reached into the storage space and withdrew the locket. He held it out for Harry before pulling it back. "You're going to share the secret, aren't you?"

Harry took the locket and right away sensed the piece of split soul inside it. "Yes, I'll tell you."

"How much you think it's worth?" Sirius asked curiously.

Harry considered telling his godfather the whole truth but did not want to make an issue of opposing Voldemort again, particularly when any discussion of horcruxes would more than likely require mentioning a certain skull. He decided to give Sirius the Dumbledorian truth. "Any founder's object is going to be worth a lot, but this is also a piece of a larger puzzle. And getting them together would be priceless."

"Really," Sirius said. "Maybe we should look for more pieces."

Harry looked away from the locket and at his godfather. "You want to?"

Sirius shrugged. "If they're as valuable as you say, then I wonder why you don't. You know what the other pieces look like or where to find them?"

Harry gave it a moment's thought. "Yeah, I got a few ideas."

"So why don't we?"

"No reason not to," Harry agreed. "But let's take a couple days to rest first."

Bellatrix was so excited she screamed "Yes!" and clapped her hands eagerly for over a minute. She did the spell four more times, with each positive result making her happier than the time before.

She cursed softly the fact that she'd used up all the muggle pregnancy tests she had bought. She'd gone through seven the first day before Harry informed her that perhaps she should wait until she had sex again before peeing on another stick.

She cast the spell again and grinned even wider. She knew things would be easier if she could get into her Lords' good graces, so she was trying to embrace her muggle and werewolf loving side. She decided she'd go buy more muggle pregnancy tests just to be sure.

She was so excited that she scampered down the steps and right out the front door. She did not think to inform her Lords or Kreacher that she was leaving. Nor did she consider leaving a note or bother to cast a glamour over herself.

She was simply giddy just thinking about the child forming inside her. She took a left down an alley that was a shortcut to the corner market.

No matter how distracted Bellatrix may have been, she would always recognize the rippling muting shudder of portkey and apparition wards going up around her. She had her wand out and cast an invisible shield as she spun around.

A dark purple spell collided with her shield, shattering it on impact and knocking her backwards off her feet.

Bellatrix immediately covered her midsection thinking of her daughter and put up another shield. Two curses splashed against it, but it held.

She rolled away from a dark red jet of light and put up another shield. She was hurriedly trying to locate all of her attackers or at least get a better idea of how many there were.

She counted two disillusioned blurs and no one behind her.

Two shouts of spells rang out sending two solid spears towards Bellatrix's head and body.

She dove behind a dumpster for cover. Immediately she strengthened the dumpster and charmed it to be mildly resistant to magic. She took a moment to conjure a small puck of dark magic.

"Give up, traitor," a nasal male's voice ordered.

Bellatrix twirled her finger over the rim of the puck and it started to smoke. She peered right around the edge of the dumpster and

ducked back as a spell ricocheted off the metal. She slid the puck straight down the alley. The two Death Eaters just stared at the innocuous looking puck sliding between them when it exploded in a flash of light.

They were coated in liquid layer of blood from the modified vampire-hunting spell. The spell was most often used to set a trap for vampires by coating people with blood. And the blood from the spell also had the side effect of slight flesh-eating capabilities.

As soon as the flash exploded, Bellatrix heard two matching screams and jumped to her feet. She began to sprint down the other end of the alley, hoping to get away. Her first step took her straight into the path of a yellow curse. She instinctively snapped another shield into place as quickly as she could. The lung-punching hex shredded her shield and knocked her backwards off her feet again.

She scrambled over to a pair of dustbins and was ducking for cover.

The two blood-covered Death Eaters behind her were approaching rapidly, rejoining the fray.

She was pinned down, unable to do anything but defend. Her shields were slowly but surely weakening, and muted curses were connecting to her extremities. She was staying especially protective of her head and midsection, making sure nothing could damage her pregnancy.

Bellatrix was running out of time and ideas.

Sirius and Harry both stepped out of their bedrooms at the same time. They caught each other's eyes and closed their doors behind them.

"Did you pay attention?" Harry asked softly.

"Yeah," Sirius said. "Blue eyes."

"Blue eyes," Harry warily agreed.

"Brunette."

“Strawberry blonde.”

“One sister, she lives in Inverness.”

“Only child, grew up in Wales.”

“Late thirties, or looking great for forties. No kids, widowed.”

“Grad student, mid twenties. Single.”

Sirius nodded. “Alright then.”

Harry nodded back and opened his bedroom door. “It’s safe, Ashley. I killed the spider.”

Sirius opened his. “No worries, Caroline. I cleaned up the broken glass.”

Caroline came out of the bedroom, looking at Sirius oddly. “You know if you had to hide something, you could’ve just told me. I’m not your wife and I’m not your mother.”

Sirius pulled her close and gave her a loud smacking kiss on the cheek. “As long as we’re clear on that.”

“I left my number on your bed,” Ashley said as she wiggled past Harry.

Harry glanced over and remarked. “It looks like you carved it into the head board.”

“Like I said,” Ashley said with a saucy grin. “I left my number on your bed. Give me a call some time.”

Caroline looked at Ashley curiously. “Do I know you?”

Ashley turned and caught Caroline’s eye. “I don’t believe so…”

“Sorry,” Harry jumped in. “Sirius, this is Ashley. Ashley, this is Sirius. And Caroline, was it?”

"It was," Caroline said nodding at Harry and turning towards the young woman who looked incredibly familiar. "Your name's Ashley, huh."

"Guess you two don't know each other," Sirius happily announced and began to urge Caroline out the door.

Caroline let Sirius push her gently, but she moved out of his way right in front of Ashley. "Your name's Ashley not... Emma, by chance?"

Ashley paled and took a step back. "Who told you that name?"

"For Christ's sake," Sirius muttered as he looked away.

Caroline put her hand up to her mouth in shock. Her eyes started watering as she explained, "It was what I named my baby shortly before the adoption agency took her away."

Ashley whimpered, squeezing her hands together in hope. "You're... you're *Jane Austen Doe*?"

"Oh Emma," Caroline exclaimed lunging forward to hug the younger woman.

"Oh... *Mum*," Ashley cried, gripping Caroline tighter.

"Oh Lord," Harry grumbled.

Sirius shouted, "Oh come on!"

"I'm so sorry, Emma," Caroline said in between her sniffles. "I was only thirteen and Daddy was up for re-election. I wasn't ready to raise a child and I just couldn't give them my real name."

"I can't believe I've found you," Ashley said, not wanting to let go. "I spent over two thousand pounds on private investigators trying to locate you."

Sirius was standing next to Harry, who could only gape at the scene. "This is ridiculous," Sirius complained, waving his hand towards the

tear-filled reunion. "Do you have any idea the odds on something like this?"

Harry turned to Sirius and looked him straight in the eye. "We've been given a gift, Sirius."

Sirius shook his head in disbelief. "I'm not supposed to long for normal days. That's not me."

"Welcome to my life," Harry asserted having come to terms with these kinds of things happening regularly.

Sirius calmed down and nodded in acceptance. "So what do we do with this gift?"

"We sleep with hot chicks, Sirius," Harry said gripping his godfather's shoulder in commiseration. "We sleep with hot chicks."

Sirius sighed. "If we must."

Harry saw Caroline and Ashley turn away and walk down the stairs arm in arm. "I think we've been forgotten."

Sirius flashed a thumbs up. "Give me ten minutes and they'll be forgotten too."

Harry saw the two women let themselves out and closed the front door behind them. He turned to Sirius, "Did I hear Caroline shout yes and then give you a standing ovation? Impressive."

Sirius shook his head. "I thought that was you."

Harry snapped his fingers. "Remus stayed over, didn't he?"

"Yeah," Sirius said before pausing. "But he had to leave for work real early. That must have been after he left... Oh."

"Oh," Harry said catching on. "You know maybe we should try and teach Moony a few moves. Or get him some numbing creams maybe."

"You up for some lunch?" Sirius asked. "I'll even pay for my half."

"With a sweet offer like that, how can I say no?"

Sirius and Harry walked out the front door, heading for the deli.

"You know I think Remus might be developing feelings for Bellatrix," Harry commented.

Sirius winced, walking in step with Harry. "I wonder if she's even capable of feelings of the good variety."

"I feel like I'm kicking a puppy when I say this," Harry admitted. "But she's really not been that bad."

Sirius rationalized, "He's only developing feelings for her because he didn't have to deal with that psychotic evil bitch killing me and separating me from you and him."

"True," Harry said. "And yeah, I hated her as much as Voldemort for killing you. But I think her boobs also play an important part in why Remus is developing feelings for her."

"Oh yeah," Sirius recalled. "*Them*. Although, you know, that other night he was spending an awful lot of time on her-"

"Sirius," Harry interrupted looking at him in disgust. He shook his head in disappointment. "Don't spoil it for me. Wait until we get a pensieve."

"Sorry," Sirius said without conviction. He kept walking in step with Harry before stopping suddenly. "Hey Harry?"

Harry belatedly noticed Sirius had stopped and turned around. "Yeah?"

Sirius pointed down the alley. "Is that Bellatrix pinned down in the middle?"

"Looks that way," Harry said calling his wand to his hand and extending half a dozen eager magical arms. "Watch our back, please."

"Gladly," Sirius said. He saw Harry nod at him and the two blood covered individuals closest to them were slammed with bludgeoning charms from Sirius and stunning spells from Harry. Both Death Eaters were down and out for the fight. Sirius turned around and guarded their rear while Harry calmly strolled down the alley towards the other Death Eaters.

Pieces of trash and debris littered throughout the alley ensured Harry had lots of ammunition. Six pieces were floating in formation around the Lords Black, all waiting in anticipation of a spell to deflect.

Harry held his wand firm, but was casting nothing. He just focused on blocking everything and acting confident and unconcerned.

The curses flying towards them began to lessen in number and in lethality. Harry stopped next to where Bellatrix was huddled down, holding a rag to a cut on her forehead. He looked at her curiously. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Sorry," Bellatrix admitted, feeling inordinately safe at the appearance of her Lords. "I was just so excited I forgot to put on a glamour."

"Excited?" Harry inquired.

Bellatrix nodded happily. "I think I'm pregnant. I was just going to get some muggle tests."

"Congratulations," Harry said while hurling a dustbin into the path of a dark red spell. "Let's hope it doesn't have horns."

Bellatrix sighed and waved airily. "Can we go soon? I'm bleeding. *And* with child."

"Let me talk to these former associates of yours," Harry said walking past her towards the remaining Death Eaters. "Shouldn't take too long."

There were three Death Eaters all standing their ground from separate positions in the alley. They stopped attempting to curse Harry when it became apparent they weren't going to be able to hit him without changing tactics.

“So you can attack and kill Bellatrix,” Harry stated while watching the three Death Eaters. “But you’re not supposed to touch me or Sirius? Interesting.”

“We’re here for her, not you, Lord Black,” the man furthest back firmly agreed.

“Hey Sirius?” Harry called out without even turning around. “Anytime you feel like making a pick...”

Sirius sent out a spray of stunning charms towards the man on the left, halfway back.

Harry flung a pair of empty soup cans through the air, smacking into the nearest two Death Eaters and sent stunning charms at the Death Eater on the right.

Two more knocked out simultaneously and the Death Eater in the back knew he was now alone. He tried to apparate away and slammed into an unexpected ward. He staggered backwards at the magical block and Harry swiftly ran up to the wizard.

A few rocks were thrown at the man who was ably defending himself from Harry’s projectiles.

“Your arms can’t touch me,” the Death Eater proudly boasted, showing off an amulet under his robe. “I’m protected from summoning and banishing.”

“Is that so?” Harry said walking up confidently. The chain around the Death Eater’s neck snapped the amulet floated towards Harry. Another invisible arm grabbed the Death Eater by the throat, lifted him off the ground and slammed him bodily into the wall.

“This thing is kinda nifty,” Harry said while inspecting at the amulet. He looked up at the man suspended in air, struggling against a force he couldn’t even touch. “What? Don’t tell me you’re surprised.”

Harry grinned dangerously as he got closer to the remaining conscious Death Eater. “You really think I’d need to pull everything out of my bag of tricks,” Harry whispered while several different

colored spells hovered dangerously around them both. “Just to beat that old bastard you call Master?”

Harry looked over at the green spell floating right up next to him. “That’s a killing curse,” he explained while it zoomed right up to the Death Eater’s face before stopping and dancing over his cheek, never quite touching him.

“But this is a memory charm,” Harry said lifting his wand up and incanting, “*Obliviate!*” Harry stunned the man and left him with just a blank in place of the last few minutes.

The mysteriously floating spells all dissipated into nothingness.

Sirius brought over the other unconscious Death Eaters and commented, “I didn’t know you could have that many spells going.”

Harry shook his head. “That was all show. Just simple colored light. If those were all the spells they looked like, I’d probably have passed out by now.”

“Oh,” Sirius said. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“That’s the idea,” Harry agreed piling the five Death Eaters together. “Always act like you know what you’re doing and people will think you do. Where’s Bellatrix?”

“I took her home,” Sirius said. “But now I have to buy a dozen muggle pregnancy tests.”

“And somewhere an angel just got her wings.”

“Ha-ha,” Sirius grumbled. “You’re coming with me. What are you doing with these guys?”

Harry stunned them all again and shrunk them down. He picked them up and slipped them in his pocket. “Considering the aurors haven’t come storming in, I’m guessing the Death Eaters warded the area from detection as well.”

“Those silly Death Eaters and their silly wards,” Sirius said shaking his head. “They didn’t even notice when I put up my own apparition and portkey wards.”

“Let’s just grab some sandwiches when we get the pregnancy tests,” Harry suggested.

Sirius was thinking quickly but coming up with nothing. “Dammit. Sandwiches and pregnancy tests. There’s a joke here, I know it.”

Harry couldn’t help but to enjoy his godfather’s frustration. “Give it up Sirius.”

“No...” Sirius whined. “I... I... I hope I don’t get an EPT in my BLT.”

“Too late,” Harry argued. “It doesn’t count.”

“Oh come on.”

“And it wasn’t funny.”

“Now you’re just talking crazy.”

The man was trudging up the path to his modest home. Five days he was gone on the Dark Lord’s mission. He knew he was just seat-filling for the sake of looking like a larger and more professional organization during some completely pointless talks with several vampire clans.

As usual, no promises were made but they agreed to revisit the issue in six months.

He was almost to his door when he finally realized what was bothering him. His portkey ward was down and it hadn’t been when he left here.

He drew his wand and quietly ran up to the front door. He opened the door and peered in, seeing the last thing he expected to see.

Alan Weston relaxed as he walked fully into his house, staring at the Mark left behind by the Death Eater Bandits. He looked in both directions of his house and saw nothing amiss when he suddenly remembered what was kept here. He ran through his kitchen towards the back hall and saw the giant gaping hole. "Fuck." He looked down the hall and saw his washer/dryer combo was gone too. "You gotta be kiddin' me."

He felt a glimmer of hope when he spotted the charmed box next to several broken pieces of drywall. "Damn," he swore when he opened it and found it empty. He threw the box onto the ground in frustration.

He walked past the empty spot where his laundry machine used to be and right towards the fireplace. He tossed in some floo powder and it flared green. He then tossed in some red-speckled powder and the flames turned from green to a mixture of green and black. He stuck his head in and announced, "We need to talk."

He pulled his head back up and dusted himself off.

Without a sound a man heavily cloaked in black appeared in front of the fireplace. "Welcome back."

"The Death Eater Bandits robbed here," Alan quickly summarized. "The locket's gone."

"You're sure," the man in black questioned.

"Be my guest," Alan waved him towards the hall. "They weren't subtle."

The man gracefully stepped over the wreckage and peered into new hole in the wall. He was looking left and right for any weaknesses as to how it could have been located.

"I thought you said Voldemort himself couldn't get in there," Alan commented.

"He couldn't," the man assured him. "But these are thieves. This is what they do. And it's not as bad as it sounds."

“It isn’t?”

The man in black shook his head. “The Death Eater Bandits have been openly mocking the Voldemort’s symbol. They are opposed to him. And the fact that they were able to locate the horcrux and steal it, points to the idea that they know what it is.”

“But we still lost it,” Alan added. “And I lost my dryer too. Savages.”

“True, we lost it. But Voldemort didn’t gain it. And I doubt he will. The Bandits might even listen to reason if I explained the situation.”

Alan agreed and nodded his head. “So what should I tell the Dark Lord about this?”

The man in black walked towards the front of the home, stopping to look at the After Dark Mark. He waved his wand in a silent practiced motion. A web of mist swirled up and around the mark. The mist blurred suddenly and imploded on itself in a small explosion of dust, completely eradicating the magical mark from existence.

“Don’t tell him anything,” the man instructed. “If he’s focusing all his efforts on the Lords Black right now and forgetting about me, all the better.”

“He is,” Alan stated. “He even called Lord Harry Black ‘that fucker’ one time causing much confusion for Larson. The resulting conversation looked like an Abbott and Costello routine. Especially if Costello ever cursed Abbott so badly that he bled out his ears and needed three weeks to heal.”

“That sounds like him.”

Alan just nodded. “Substituting fear for power. On the sheep, it can be effective.”

“But it’s horrible for marketing. Any other news of note?” the man inquired as he walked out the front door to inspect the wards.

“Nope,” Alan informed him. “He’s still researching parallel dimensions and worlds beyond the natural one.”

The man in black shook his head in disappointment.

"It's been a while since we fed the Ministry anything and it might be worth convincing them that I'm one of their *deep cover informants*," Alan said with a mocking voice.

"Go ahead and tell them about the vampire meeting," the man in black instructed. "We should keep them thinking that they're accomplishing something."

Alan saw the man in black looking back and forth in surprise. "What is it?"

"Two of them came to this point."

"They spotted your ward?"

"One crossed here, probably animagus, but that still shouldn't be possible for anyone other than the two of us or..." The man trailed off in thought and looked back at the ward. "The other bandit... disappears?"

"He went back?"

"No, neither of them ever went back. They took your portkey ward down and left that way."

"Should I feel shaken and violated that they've broken into my home and shattered my sense of security?"

The man in black looked at him curiously. "Do you? Because if you need a hug, I know a guy."

"No," Alan admitted. "I just wish they hadn't taken my dryer."

The man in black was staring in the spot wondering what the strange echoes of magic he could sense meant.

Alan gave him time to look around before finally asking, "So what do I tell Dumbledore?"

"Do you think anyone else is spying for Dumbledore?"

Alan shrugged. "He knew about the vampire meeting before I told him, but that might have just been whispers in pubs that spread to the wrong ears."

"Maybe," the man in black considered. "Goodness knows Snape is always trying to needle that information out of his old roommates."

"That man has the subtlety of a mountain troll in a shopping mall."

"I think you underestimate trolls," the man in black argued. "For now though, let's err on the side of caution. Tell Dumbledore the results of the vampire meetings and... and... And yeah, go ahead and tell him that the Dark Lord is researching parallel dimensions. That should help your credibility."

"So no one is going to find out I got robbed?"

The man nodded. "No one but us. It gives me some leverage for when I track the Death Eater Bandits down." He saw the look on Alan Weston's face. "Oh get over it. It was a dryer."

Alan was all set to whine about how it was more than just a dryer. "That," he began, only to see the man in black disappear as silently as he arrived.

Alan sighed. "Fucker."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"You know putting Grimmauld under a Fidelius isn't that bad of an idea even if we do move Bellatrix into her own place."

"If?" Sirius squeaked. "What do you mean *if*? And you've got a problem Harry. Your solution to everything is putting it under Fidelius. It's not healthy."

"It's a fantastic charm," Harry indignantly argued.

"And if we put it over our place that would mean no more bringing muggles home."

Harry shrugged. "I know. But we made the decision against it before we publicly kicked Voldemort's ass."

"Our gift though, Harry," Sirius pleaded. "We should use our gift. We owe it to sex. You know we do."

Harry always had trouble arguing against sex.

"And don't give me that hotels or their places bollocks," Sirius said shaking his finger.

"Fine," Harry said. "I'm not saying we have to. But give it some consideration."

They arrived at the entrance to the newest branch of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes located in Hogsmeade. Harry opened the door and let Sirius in first.

"Attention shoppers," Sirius yelled loudly. "There is an extremely irritable werewolf in here. Do not antagonize him."

"Sirius," Remus called out from behind the cash register wincing at the sudden yelling. He rubbed his ears, grateful that the store was currently empty. "I'm not above jinxing your eyebrows into thinking they're foreskin."

Sirius blinked. "That would make my head look really odd. Both of them, come to think of it."

"You feeling okay, Moony?" Harry asked as he leaned on the counter next to Remus.

Remus half-heartedly grunted positively. "Considering last night, yeah, about normal."

Sirius was still walking through the aisles looking at the goodies for sale. "I bet you'd be feeling better if you just let me keep you company, instead of you know who."

"Voldemort?" Harry inquired.

Remus turned to Harry. "You think I spend the full moon with Voldemort?"

Sirius laughed as he picked up a product, smelled it, and set it back down. "I'd forgotten about all those nicknames like You-Know-Who."

"Bleh," Harry said sticking out his tongue. "Easy for you to forget them. You never even got one after breaking out of prison."

"I should have gotten one," Sirius realized and began to daydream aloud. "He-Who-Could-Not-Be-Contained."

"Twelve years," Remus reminded.

"For-Too-Long," Sirius added.

Harry decided not to crush his godfather's hopes of being nickname worthy. "I swear if I heard Hermione's spiel about 'fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself' one more time, I was going find You-Know-Who and jam my You-Know-What You-Know-How into his You-Know-Where... hole."

Remus tiredly looked at Sirius messing up one of the displays. "This has been great guys. I'm so glad you dropped by."

"Sorry Moony," Harry apologized. "Aren't you closing soon?"

Remus nodded. "Officially we're open until ten." He waved his wand towards the front turning the sign off and locking the door. "But it's close enough for me."

"Nice work ethic," Sirius nodded. "Tonks would approve."

Harry jumped in with a smile. "We've got some good news, some bad news, and some great news."

Remus looked up curiously. "Give me the bad news."

"No," Harry firmly retorted. "I wasn't asking what you wanted first. The good news is we're kicking Bellatrix out."

"What?" Remus asked worriedly. "Kicking her out?"

"She doesn't know yet," Sirius commented.

"Why?" Remus said looking at Harry and Sirius in disappointment.

"Well that ties into the bad news," Harry said with a clap of his hands. "See, the reason we're kicking her out is that we've got a new house rule: no pregnant chicks."

"That seems a bit harsh," Remus said before stopping in sudden realization of what Harry had just implied. "You mean she's..."

"Carrying your furry half-breed beast," Sirius agreed. "Yup."

"That's..." Remus was struggling for words. He straightened up and defiantly whined, "That's not bad news."

Sirius looked at Harry in confusion. "I guess it depends on how you look at it."

Remus frowned. "So then what's the great news?"

Harry grinned brightly. "We've submitted an offer for the flat next to yours."

Remus took a moment before connecting the good news and bad news with the great news. He closed his eyes and sighed. "She's always going to be at my place, isn't she?"

"I'm really not sure," Sirius said walking up to the counter where Harry and Remus were. "But just in case, let me be the first to say... *ha-hah!*" Sirius laughed while childishly pointing.

"*Ha-hah,*" Harry echoed and pointed at Remus. "Second."

"This is..." Remus was still processing the situation. "This is big. Where is she? I should talk to her."

"She was at Grimmauld Place," Harry said checking with Sirius.

Sirius nodded. "I think she was planning on a night in. I remember something about drowning herself in the bathtub."

"Whatever," Harry said waving Sirius off. "We're going to the Hog's Head, Moony. Care to join us?"

"No," Remus said shaking his head. He started locking up the register and shutting down everything else. "I'm going to go see her. This is... wow."

"Congratulations," Harry said finally realizing how much Remus was smiling. "Forgot about that part. Way to impregnate."

"Thanks," Remus agreed patting Harry on the back and urging them out of the store. "Come on, come on."

Sirius and Harry were pushed out the front door and Remus activated the store's lockdown wards.

"Slow down," Harry argued as Remus was frantically locking up.

"See you later guys," Remus snapped and apparated away with a loud crack.

"It's not like you don't have eight and half months or so," Harry mumbled towards the empty air.

Sirius and Harry walked through the wizarding village and down to the familiar dingy pub.

"Grab us a pitcher of draft," Sirius said. "I'm going to hit the loo."

Harry carefully walked up to the bar and saw Gin smirking at him. "Please don't nut me. You know Sirius is waiting in the bathroom just hoping to see the pictures change."

"What's in it for-" Gin began when a group at a back booth called out for her. She pasted a clearly mocking smile on her face. "I'll be with you in a minute, Harry."

Harry turned to his left and saw a very cute redhead watching him unabashedly. Harry looked away and tried to smother his grin. He walked over to her cataloguing just which parts of her form fitting robes were pulled taut. "You know an attractive young woman like yourself stands out quite a bit in a place like this."

"As does as a Lord Black," the redhead playfully retorted. She turned forward to face the bar, looking away from Harry finally.

Harry was mesmerized by the nape of her neck and her profile when she looked away. "So what is it that brings an attractive young woman like yourself into a place like this?"

"Are you flirting with me, Lord Black?" she asked with a small grin distinctly lacking in innocence.

"Please, call me Harry," Harry said noticing his godfather walk up. Harry had been waving Sirius off the whole way but the older man barged right up to him anyway. Harry warned, "I hope there's an emergency."

"No, not exactly," Sirius replied. He glanced at the redhead wearing a sultry grin. "Sorry to interrupt you. I just need to speak to Harry for a second."

The young woman was seductively pulling the cherry stem from her mouth as she swallowed the fruit that had been on the bottom of her drink. "I can wait."

“What?” Harry irritably asked his godfather.

“Listen, Harry, you remember when you gave me a hard time for hitting on that nineteen year old installing the floo?”

“She was eighteen,” Harry corrected and glanced at the redhead again, guessing her to be early twenties.

“Yeah, about that...” Sirius said before reaching over and tapping the redhead on the shoulder. “What’s your last name?”

She glanced at Sirius oddly and answered. “Potter.”

“See ya, Harry,” Sirius cheerfully said, slapping Harry on the back as he walked away.

Harry’s entire body froze in shock, suddenly realizing why the young woman had seemed familiar. He turned to look at her closer. He wasn’t saying anything just staring at her in abject horror and fascination.

She blushed slightly under the intense scrutiny. “Don’t tell me my parents have managed to scare you that badly.”

“You’re Sarah Potter,” Harry said in a calm dulcet tone. “Sarah... Potter.”

“Yeah,” Sarah agreed. “And you’re Lord Harry Black. My little brother’s hero.”

“I...” Harry stuttered, becoming disgusted with himself for having entertained certain thoughts. “I...”

“Want to buy me a drink?” Sarah suggested with a smile, shaking the ice in her empty glass.

“I...”

Sirius came up from behind Harry and saw he was struggling. “Listen, Miss Potter. I’m sorry but I’m going to have to take Harry here. A situation has come up that requires our immediate attention.”

"Nice meeting you," Sarah said tipping her glass back so she could chew up her ice.

Harry wanted to smile seeing his 'sort of' sister was such an understanding genial person, but he knew how smiling at her would look. He was stuck in a loop of inaction as Sirius turned him around and led him back towards the other side of the bar.

Sirius sat Harry down on a stool and spun him around, attracting his full attention. "I wasn't lying, Harry. A situation has come up that I think we need to address."

"What's up?" Harry asked, acting more alert than he felt.

"I just met a young woman who was drowning herself in butterbeer," Sirius explained.

"Butterbeer?"

"I'm guessing she has a low tolerance," Sirius assured him. "Anyways, she has had what she calls an unfortunately boring life. Bemoaning the fact that she never got into a fight in school, never went on an adventure, and claims to have never done anything spontaneous on a lark."

"Okay," Harry said not sure where Sirius was going with this.

"When I heard this, I knew immediately it was up to us to correct this oversight," Sirius continued. "We need to make an adventure. Just go somewhere random, find something fun to do, and take her with us."

Harry was a bit skeptical but shrugged. "Alright."

Sirius turned Harry around towards the corner of the bar where a brunette was lackadaisically resting her chin on the bar. "Harry, I'd like you to meet Hermione Granger."

"Hermione?" Harry said unable to believe his eyes. "Your hair looks great."

“I’m not going to sleep with you,” she mumbled, still hunched over the bar.

“No, it’s just,” Harry commented. “Your hair is so straight and wavy... It’s not frizzy at all.”

“I’m still not going to sleep with you.” She finally lifted her head up and saw Sirius Black smiling widely at her. “Please tell me you’re not still on this.”

Sirius sat down right beside and swung his arm over her shoulder. “You were not meant to live an unfortunately boring life.”

“That was the butterbeer talking,” Hermione said shaking her head.

“You’ve earned an adventure and we’re here to give it to you,” Sirius insisted. “You know it’ll do you some good.”

Hermione’s face curled up in a pout as she pondered the best response. “Fine,” she conceded. “I suppose you could be right. So when were you thinking?”

“Oh no,” Sirius assured her, grabbing her drink and downing the rest of it. “We’re doing it now.”

“Now?” Hermione squeaked in surprise. She looked at her watch. “But it’s already past ten.”

Harry shook his head in disappointment. “Oh, Hermione.”

“The fact that you’re concerned that it’s already past ten just further proves how important it is that we do this immediately,” Sirius assured. “And besides, it’s not ten everywhere.”

Harry checked that he had his satchel with him. “I’ve got some energizing potions. And I can’t help but notice it’s about 8 in the morning on the Sydney beaches.”

“I was thinking New Zealand waterfalls maybe,” Sirius suggested.

Harry shrugged. “It’s two in the afternoon in Vegas.”

Sirius shook his head. "Since when has time ever mattered in Vegas?"

Hermione saw the two Lord Blacks conversing back and forth and couldn't take it. "You can not just up and go anywhere you want."

Harry smirked at one of his first friends. "Are you a witch or not?"

Hermione resisted the urge to huff. "You still need permits for international travel."

Sirius unceremoniously lifted Hermione up off her bar stool. "Come along Miss Granger. You're traveling with two noble Lords."

"What does that matter?" Hermione questioned curiously.

"Harry?" Sirius prompted.

"When in service of matters pertaining to an ancient and noble family, a Lord is not restricted by such pedestrian laws," Harry happily recited. "Before you ask, it is up to the Lord's discretion. And I say this is a family matter."

"You don't even know me," Hermione argued but didn't resist in the slightest as she was led out the front of the Hog's Head.

"That's what makes it spontaneous and random," Harry argued.

"Where do we start?" Sirius asked, wrapping an arm around Hermione.

Harry snaked his arm around Hermione from the other side. "I'm thinking let's start in Egypt. Just to take a peek."

"Egypt?" Hermione asked excitedly.

Sirius turned to Harry. "I'll help, but you're pulling us."

Harry nodded and began to focus on the target for a long distance apparition.

"Why Egypt?" Hermione quietly asked Sirius.

Sirius leaned towards her and whispered, "He still wants to ride on the back of a nundu."

Hermione's eyes widened fearfully. "Ride on what-" She was cut off as she felt the squeezing sensation and loud sound accompanied with disapparition.

The group of three slammed into place on the muddy bank of a river. Harry and Sirius were trying to hold Hermione steady but they all fell backwards onto their bums.

Hermione screamed and scrambled away from them. "What do you think you're doing? Oh god. I think I'm going to be sick." Hermione was on her hands and knees trying to catch her breath.

Harry jumped up and was brushing off his robes. "How much did you have to drink?"

"I'm not drunk," Hermione snapped without even looking up. "I'm just not used to being forcefully apparated and kidnapped."

"I told you she needs our help," Sirius assured Harry.

Harry reached into his satchel and found a bottle of water. He held it out for Hermione, "Water?"

Hermione accepted the bottle and eagerly drank it up. "This is a bad idea. Take me home."

"Sorry Hermione," Harry said shaking his head. "I have an old friend who would be very disappointed in me if I did that."

"You really *are* kidnapping me," Hermione said with a frown as she sipped the chilled beverage. "I don't know who you think you're dealing with-"

"Hermione Jean Granger, only daughter of Samuel and Delilah Granger," Harry recounted. "Both muggles and both dentists. How am I doing so far?"

Hermione had her wand out in an instant and was pointing it at Harry and then Sirius intermittently. She was slightly worried that neither seemed concerned nor had they drawn their wands even. "What do you want from me?"

Harry carefully withdrew his wand and nodded at Sirius to do the same. "I swear on my magic, I mean you no harm, no ill will, and only wish to break the monotony of your so-called unfortunately boring life."

Sirius made the same pledge and they both tucked their wands away.

"Happy?" Harry asked while digging into his satchel.

Hermione's wand arm lowered and she looked at the two Lord Blacks curiously. "Oaths can be broken."

"Oh brother," Sirius grumbled. "Why don't you cut loose for once? We're here to have some fun. Midnight skinny-dipping?"

"No!" Hermione insisted angrily knowing all too well the reputations of both Lord Blacks. "Where are we?"

"You're in denial," Sirius replied unable to help himself.

Harry groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Feel free to curse him for that."

"What?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"That's the Nile," Harry said pointing towards the river. "He was making a punny."

Hermione giggled unable to help herself.

Harry saw Hermione laugh and turned to Sirius. "It's worse than we thought."

"I think we need skinny-dipping," Sirius said lifting his robe off.

"Stop!" Hermione said abruptly turning around. "I won't go along with this insanity unless you both stay fully clothed."

Sirius frowned and pulled his robe back on. "At least she didn't say anything-"

"Me too!" Hermione quickly added.

"Nuts," Sirius sighed. "Fine. Fully clothed adventure. That sounds just... wild."

Harry cast a few location charms and decided, "We're a couple kilometers south of where we want to be. You guys feel up to some hiking?"

"Let's float," Sirius suggested digging into his pocket. He withdrew a small yellow packet that he tore in half. The packet quickly expanded into a full-size octagonal raft that he dragged down to the river's edge.

"You carry an inflatable raft with you?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"Of course." Sirius nodded. "In case of emergencies or sudden pool parties."

Harry climbed into the raft and held out a hand to help Hermione in.

"Sudden pool parties?" Hermione questioned while delicately stepping into the raft.

"The parties aren't sudden. The pools are," Sirius added pushing the raft off the bank and hopping in himself.

"Don't ask," Harry interrupted Hermione.

Hermione saw them drifting out into the river and looked around. "Don't we need oars?"

"Naw," Sirius said. "That's what we keep Harry around for."

Harry had extended his invisible magical arms and was slowly paddling them downstream.

"That's right! Your magical appendages," Hermione brightened as the scholar inside her shined through. "I'd love to study them sometime. See what they can really do."

Harry and Sirius exchanged looks, both highly amused. Harry nodded at his godfather. "Go ahead."

"All of his magical appendages?" Sirius asked with a snicker. "Or just the invisible ones?"

Hermione blushed as she realized what she had said. "I didn't mean it like *that*."

"We're just giving you a hard time," Harry assured her while his arms continued to break the stillness of the water with small gentle splashes.

Hermione's cheeks were still pink as she replied, "Yeah I get the feeling that's exactly what you both want to give me."

Sirius gasped and turned to Harry. "A lewd joke! We're making progress already."

"You two are shameless," Hermione admitted with a grin.

"Pretty much," Sirius agreed digging out a bottle of firewhiskey.

Harry was leaning back looking up at the expansive sky. "That's a bright moon."

"It was full last night," Sirius reminded thinking of Remus.

Hermione took a moment to appreciate her surroundings, the crystal clear reflection on the river's surface, the nighttime sounds of frogs and insects, the gentle breeze of the comfortably cool night. "It's beautiful."

"And just think," Harry added. "If we hadn't kidnapped you, can you ever see yourself going for a float down the Nile on the spur of the moment?"

"This is crazy," Hermione half-heartedly complained. "You're just lucky it's a nice night."

"So tell us about yourself," Harry stated. "Why is it that you think you've had an unfortunately boring life?"

"I said it once," Hermione chided. "You don't need to keep using that phrase."

Harry accepted the bottle from Sirius and took a swig of the firewhiskey.

"Speaking of my life," Hermione turned towards Harry accusingly. "Just why do you know so much about me?"

Harry winked at her and offered the bottle. "That's classified, I'm afraid."

"Declassify it," Hermione ordered taking the bottle and knocking back a big gulp. She quickly began to cough as she swallowed the harsh liquid.

Harry was biting his lip and glanced at Sirius. Sirius just shrugged and supplied, "In another life, I bet you and Harry were best friends."

Hermione was wiping her face after the minor coughing fit and handed the bottle to Sirius. "What does that mean?"

"Don't do this, Hermione," Harry instructed. "Don't try to analyze things, don't break it down until everything has an explanation and you understand it all. Tonight is about you cutting loose and having some fun."

"You're not stalking me, are you?" Hermione warily asked.

"No, I'm not stalking you," Harry assured her. "Don't you trust me?"

Hermione was closely watching Harry looking for any clue to his mystery. "I don't know why, but for some reason I do."

Harry smiled brightly.

She turned to Sirius, "You, not so much."

"Good instincts," Harry agreed.

“Hey,” Sirius said in defense of himself. “That’s... alright fine. So tell us. You got a job? A boyfriend?” He paused before hopefully adding, “Maybe a girlfriend?”

Hermione glanced at Sirius and was going to ask but Harry immediately offered, “Yes, he really is that perverted.”

Hermione nodded and decided to just trust her gut. “I’m the Assistant to the Deputy Director of Non-Human Relations for the Ministry of Magic.”

“That’s a heck of a title,” Harry agreed thinking that was significantly lower than the position his Hermione had been offered by the Ministry. “How’s the job?”

“It’s fine,” Hermione answered immediately.

“Ouch,” Sirius said with a wince. “Sorry to hear that.”

“It’s not bad,” Hermione continued. “I mean the work is good. House elf mistreatment is a much more important issue than people realize.”

Harry had to look away to keep from laughing at her.

“I’m serious!” Hermione indignantly replied when she saw Harry’s amusement.

“Hey, me too,” Sirius was forced to interject.

“I’m not laughing at you,” Harry explained to Hermione through his chuckles. He turned to Sirius, “And I’m definitely not laughing at you.”

Sirius shrugged.

“It’s just,” Harry grinned at Hermione. “It’s nothing. You’re right. Most house elves do deserve better.”

“Thank you,” Hermione agreed. “And just so you know, jokes about your name Sirius, are the quickest way to get a woman to never want to sleep with you.”

“Hey,” Sirius replied.

“Ever,” Hermione added. “Ever.”

Harry smiled at Sirius’ pouting. “Since you so kindly brought up the subject, Hermione, tell us, is there a significant other in your life?”

“No,” Hermione answered. “Well, not really.”

“Not really, huh?” Harry jumped on the phrase. “And does this man know he’s not significant?”

Hermione looked away. “Probably not. I tried to explain that we should just be friends, but he talked me into calling it ‘taking a break.’”

“Want us to kill him?” Sirius offered.

“No,” Hermione glanced over at Sirius trying to judge the veracity of his comment. “Please don’t.”

“Fair enough,” Harry agreed. “What else you got? Tell us something juicier. Like why you feel your life is boring.”

“It’s not boring,” Hermione argued. “It’s just... I don’t know. I feel like I’ve missed out on things. And I feel like there should be more I’m doing, instead of being stuck in a job where the fact that I’m a woman doesn’t matter, but the fact that my parents are muggles is one of the most important things about me.”

“Pureblood bastards,” Harry angrily mocked.

“That’s us,” Sirius agreed. “Well, me anyway. You’re not exactly a pureblood.”

“Shhh,” Harry mock hushed the older man. “That’s supposed to be our little secret.”

“You’re not a pureblood?” Hermione asked curiously. “But you’re Lord Black.”

Harry shrugged. “My mum was muggleborn.” He paused and saw Hermione was looking for more explanation. “I got the title from my godfather. He died. Left me a big house and an evil house elf that told

me to use a certain ring to fix the wards on the place. I put on the ring, fixed the wards, and only later found out it was a hereditary ring. The house elf was hoping the ring was going to kill me, not make me the new Lord Black.”

Hermione frowned at the description of the elf. “He may have just been confused.”

“No,” Sirius assured her. “He was trying to kill him.”

“So how are you Lord Black, then?” Hermione asked Sirius.

“Long story,” Harry said. “We’re not going to tell it. Besides, I think this is what we’re looking for.” Harry said paddling them off to the large recess where the river curved east.

“What are we looking for?” Hermione asked, seeing lots of dense foliage and signs of paths that had grown over years ago.

“This village was destroyed in 1893 by a nundu,” Harry explained hopping out of the raft and dragging it up the bank. “It was the second time in three hundred years the village was visited by one.”

“You’re genuinely looking for a nundu,” Hermione commented stepping out of the raft. “Have you been checked by a mind healer in a while?”

“Come on Granger,” Sirius chided with a smile. “Grow a pair.”

“I’m a woman,” Hermione reminded.

Sirius frowned at the literal interpretation and added, “Grow a pair of tits?”

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest. “My breasts are just fine, thank you very much.”

“That they are,” Sirius happily agreed, drawing his wand and catching up to Harry.

Hermione looked out towards the river and thought she saw something large make a splash as it surfaced and dove back down. She quickly decided she didn't want to be alone and hurried to catch up to them. "Wait for me."

She ran past Sirius and caught up to Harry, grabbing onto his hand. "Don't you dare leave me alone out here in the middle of the night."

Harry looked down at their entwined hands and smiled at her. "You'll be fine." Harry reached an area with some rotted and broken down structures that once were huts. "This is the place."

"This is creepy," Hermione said, holding her wand in her free hand.

"If you see a nundu," Harry ordered. "Let me know."

"Sure thing," Hermione skeptically agreed.

"What do they look like?" Sirius asked staring off into the darkness.

Harry grinned as Hermione immediately responded to a question just like the Hermione he went to school with.

"They resemble leopards, but are more than three times their size, larger even than any of the muggle great cats. Contrary to popular belief they cannot turn invisible. In fact it is the rosettes on a nundu's back that have illusionary abilities allowing them to smoothly blend into their surroundings."

Sirius blinked and turned towards Hermione. "Okay..."

"Great big leopards," Harry summarized.

"Gotcha," Sirius agreed pulling out his omnioculars and turning back towards the darkness. "Are they ever normal sized leopards?"

"Maybe a baby nundu," Harry suggested while squinting in the distance. "Why?"

“Because I think see a baby nundu coming down from a tree through there,” Sirius pointed. “It’s crawling backwards down the trunk in goofy way.”

“Really?” Harry said hurrying over towards Sirius.

“What?” Hermione squeaked knowing leopards were nocturnal hunters. “Come on guys. Hunting nundus is funny enough in theory, but let’s not anger the dangerous wildlife please.”

“Gimme those,” Harry said grabbing the omnioculars from his godfather. “Oh I see it! It’s creeping across the ground this way.”

“Err,” Sirius interrupted. “You need to look to your right. It’s still in the tree I think.”

Harry panned slightly and gasped. “Sweet! There’s two baby nundus.”

“They are *not* baby nundus!” Hermione whispered insistently. “But we should still get out of here.”

Harry was continuing to focus on the large felines with the omnioculars switching between night vision and heat signatures.

“You can go back to the raft, if you want,” Sirius suggested.

“I’m not going out there alone,” Hermione hissed. “Come on you guys, let’s go.”

Harry sighed and handed the omnioculars back to Sirius. “Hermione’s right.”

“Thank god,” Hermione relaxed for a moment.

“They’re not baby nundus,” Harry agreed. “Their heads are normal sized for those bodies. They’re just leopards.”

“I’m right about leaving, too, though, right?” Hermione pleaded. “Right?”

“They’re headed this way,” Sirius happily cheered.

"We should go." Hermione tried lying as she pulled on Harry's arm. "I'm a bleeder. And carry many contagious diseases."

Harry stood his ground shaking his head. "They just want to come over and say *meow*. That's cat for 'Hi Hermione.'" He paused and scratched his chin. "Or is it 'Die mudblood?' I get those two mixed up."

Hermione smacked Harry on the arm. "We don't have time for your stupid jokes."

"Yeah really, Harry," Sirius said with a frown. "We barely have enough time for the smart jokes as it is."

"You're not helping," Hermione whined, wanting to run but unprepared to leave Harry's side.

"Here," Sirius handed her the omnioculars. "You can see them too. They're right through there."

Hermione took the omnioculars and was surprised to find they showed heat signatures. "There are three of them!"

"Ooh, three," Sirius grinned. "First person to scratch one behind the ears gets free drinks."

"You're on," Harry quickly agreed. "Belly rubs count too."

"You guys are insane," Hermione pleaded. "What happened to swearing not to harm me?"

Harry patted Hermione on the top of her head and assured her. "We'll be fine. It's not like leopards can cast anti-apparition jinxes."

"That'd be scary if they could," Sirius agreed with a shiver.

Hermione twitched as she felt a magical wave run over her. "What was that?"

Sirius closed his eyes, concentrated, and grunted when nothing happened. "Ack. Anti-apparition."

Hermione quickly tried to apparate and slammed into the ward. She whimpered loudly and was starting to shake.

"Oh crap," Sirius's voice squeaked and took a step back.

Harry just chuckled happily. "Sorry guys. I couldn't resist."

Hermione started punching Harry as he removed the anti-apparition ward. "That wasn't funny! That was mean and nasty!"

Sirius snickered. "Actually it was pretty funny. I think a little pee came out."

Harry laughed and tried to calm Hermione. "Relax. The leopards can sense your fear."

"Everyone can sense my fear," Hermione begged. "I'm not making it a secret."

"Here kitty, kitty, kitty," Sirius said as one of the leopards emerged from the shadows and stopped to watch the three people. "Oh aren't you a big kitty."

"Grrr," the front leopard growled loudly trying to scare them off.

Sirius paused and turned towards Hermione. "Do leopards eat people?"

"There are some conflicting opinions on whether the aggressive behavior first observed-

"Hermione," Harry interrupted.

"Yes," Hermione summarized as she gripped onto Harry's arm. "Yes they do."

A second leopard was hunched to the ground and inching forward with its shoulder blades up threateningly. "Grrr."

Sirius looked over and saw the second leopard had stopped moving forward. He got the feeling that was a bad sign. "I think I'm gonna..."

With a sudden crack, Sirius apparated a safe distance behind Harry and Hermione.

“*Rhawl!*” Both leopards roared as they leapt through the air at the gunshot like sound.

Harry’s invisible arms easily stopped both cats, slamming into them hard enough to flip them tail over head onto their backs. “Coward,” he called out to Sirius.

Another crack sounded as Sirius apparated right next to Harry and Hermione. “You’re the coward.”

Hermione was unable to let bad logic go by without comment. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Speaking of big pussy,” Sirius segued with a jerk of his thumb. “There’s another leopard back there.”

Harry was pushing the angry cats away, trying not to seriously injure them despite the fact that they kept coming.

“This is unnatural behavior,” Hermione said, hunched down keeping a hand on Harry at all times. “Leopards aren’t pack hunters. Occasionally they’ll share territory but they shouldn’t all be attacking.”

“I knew it,” Sirius argued. “Baby nundus.”

“They’re *not* baby nundus,” Hermione insisted.

Sirius saw there was no reasoning with Hermione. “I’m going to make sure the raft is okay.”

“Wait,” Harry called out grabbing onto Sirius’ arm just as he apparated. There was an extraordinarily loud crack as Sirius disappeared and Harry was left standing there holding Sirius’ detached left arm. He glanced at Hermione, his face showing worry for the first time. “Oops.”

Hermione screeched as several leopards charged and were again rebuffed by Harry’s invisible arms.

"You splinched me!" Sirius shouted loudly in the distance.

"Sorry," Harry shouted back.

Hermione was watching the now four different leopards all prowling around her and Harry. "Go away!" She shouted while picking up rocks and throwing them at the leopards. "Get out of here!"

The cats were jumping away from the rocks but not backing down any.

Harry's mind began going off in dangerous directions. He turned to Hermione and said, "Cover me for a second."

"What?" Hermione yelped as Harry dropped to his knees. She hurriedly cast banishing charms at every leopard whether they were attacking or not. "What are you doing?"

"Shh," Harry shushed while casting a series of various charms on the unattached left arm he was still holding.

Harry jumped back to his feet and knocked back a quietly approaching leopard. "You missed that one. It could've killed us."

Hermione turned to look at Harry in disbelief.

"Now remember," Harry said. "Whatever happens, don't tell Sirius." And just like that, Harry chucked the extra appendage through the air like a stick for a dog. "Fetch!"

All four leopards closest to them chased after the lightly blood-covered limb.

Harry and Hermione just stood there watching as a fight quickly broke out for the arm. Two of the leopards each had an end and were wrestling in a vicious tug of war, while a third chomped down right in the middle, bending the arm at the elbow.

"No ear scratching or belly rubbing yet, right?" Sirius asked stealthily rejoining them.

"What took you so long?" Harry asked.

"Hello, splinch?" Sirius said pointing towards his empty sleeve. "I wasn't about to try apparating back to you."

"Well good," Harry said subtly glancing towards the leopards grouped together. "Because the sound of apparition is part of what's making them attack."

"Really?" Sirius asked.

Harry nodded.

Sirius began searching the ground around where they were standing. "What did you do with my arm?"

Harry flashed Hermione a look and innocently replied, "What arm?"

Sirius saw the leopards were growling in a pitched battle for dominance and suddenly took notice of what they were battling over. "What the-... Oh my-... *Harry!*"

"I'm sorry, Sirius," Harry assured. "I tried everything I could, but you know how Hermione gets-"

"You threw it and yelled fetch," Hermione argued.

Harry frowned. "No one likes a tattle tale."

Sirius was tempted to transform into his dog form but knew even if he managed it, he'd only have three legs and he'd be up against a pack of leopards. "Get me my arm back!"

Harry looked over and saw all of the leopards were now surrounding the arm, snapping their jaws, and swatting dangerously at each other. He glanced back at Sirius, "They really seem to like it."

"Harry!"

"They could be starving, you know."

"It's *my* arm."

"Fine," Harry said lifting his wand struggling to decide on what spell to use. Finally he sent a couple spanking hexes at the leopards and that just seemed to piss them off as two of them began to charge again.

Harry glanced back at Sirius. "You really need an extra arm? One could be plenty."

"Dammit Harry," Sirius swore.

"Oh for Merlin's sake," Hermione grumbled. She swung her arm in a wide motion and lobbed a large conjured cantaloupe through the air. The mid-sized fruit landed right next to one of the leopards. Her second attempt collided with the back of a leopard that sent it whimpering off.

"Good thinking," Harry agreed remembering when Hermione taught him this spell as well as the more draining version he preferred. He slashed his wand upward and swept his extended arm underhand, lobbing a conjured watermelon right next to the leopards.

Hermione and Harry repeated their motions raining down large round fruit and sending the leopards scampering in circles. Cantaloupe and watermelons were crashing into the leopards backs and bouncing off the ground in random directions.

Sirius could only look at his poor mauled arm in disbelief.

"You know you could try summoning it while we distract them," Harry suggested, sending another watermelon arcing through the night sky.

Sirius had his wand out and was attempting to summon his arm. "It's not working."

Harry was about to give up on hiding his giggles. "Maybe the leopards haven't figured out anti-apparition yet but they've mastered anti-summoning charms."

Hermione cracked first and started laughing.

Sirius realized he'd been had. "You bitches."

Harry caught Hermione's eye and joined her in laughter.

"I really thought they were chewing my arm up," Sirius admitted, holding his remaining hand over his heart.

"Yeah, about that..."

"Harry!"

"Sirius," Hermione explained. "I didn't see what Harry cast on your arm, but those leopards would have torn that thing to shreds by now if it wasn't protected."

"Shoo!" Sirius called out. "Go away!"

The tall grass on the other side of the leopards began to sway and a violent thrashing was heard.

"Or at least stay over there," Sirius corrected, taking a step back and moving behind Harry.

One last watermelon from Harry landed flush on a leopard's rump and it yelped out. All of the leopards then turned tail and ran leaving the arm behind as an afterthought.

Harry looked at Hermione curiously, while staying alert looking for danger.

Hermione shrugged. "They've been acting like a pack. I think we scared the leader away and the rest fell in line."

Harry looked over to see how confident she was in her theory.

"Maybe," Hermione added uncertainly.

Sirius jogged up over to his un-summonable arm. "Dammit Harry. That's gonna leave a scar."

"I did one shallow cut so a little blood would come out before I charmed it," Harry argued. "Most of that is just leopard slobber."

"That's a deep gash not a shallow cut," Sirius pouted.

"Don't be so melodramatic," Harry chided.

Hermione gasped loudly and fell backwards. "We should be dead." She mumbled to herself. "We should all be dead."

"That's melodramatic," Sirius said pointing towards Hermione. "I'm being reasonable."

Harry ignored his godfather and hurried over to Hermione. "What's going... *holy shit!* That thing is big. Is it dead?"

"This is insane," Hermione said shaking her head. "There's no way..."

Sirius walked to the edge of the high grass and saw what they were looking at. "Hey, nundu!" He glanced at Harry and walked right up to the massive beast. He rubbed his hand on its belly. "First."

"There's not a mark on it." Harry could see its eyes were still open but the magnificent creature was clearly no longer among the living. "What happened?"

"It's so soft," Sirius said rubbing the nundu's belly. "What is this thing? About four meters, you think?"

Harry saw Hermione had been shocked senseless and walked up to the head large enough to eat him in two bites. He pushed up the top lip and saw rows of sharp teeth. "It's still warm. I think this might be the pack leader and the reason the others ran away."

Hermione realized Harry was addressing her and nodded. "You're probably right. But what killed it?"

"I don't see any blood," Sirius commented, lifting up the large tail and fighting his animagus urge to sniff the beast's rear end. "Heart attack?"

Harry wrapped his hands around the front teeth and slowly pulled the massive jaws apart. He slammed the mouth closed and looked up. The others looked at him inquisitively as he repeated the motion and looked in the nundu's mouth again. "You gotta be kiddin' me."

“What is it?” Hermione asked.

Harry sighed. “The nundu suffocated. It couldn’t breathe.”

“Are you sure?” Hermione asked, finally stepping up to giant magical mammal. She looked in as Harry held the jaws open. “Oh.”

Sirius walked around the supposed most dangerous creature in the world and looked through the sharp jagged teeth. He barked out a laugh when he was able to see down the feline’s throat. Sticking out the behind the swollen tongue was the top half of a large watermelon. “I should have guessed.”

“I didn’t mean to kill it,” Harry pleaded. “It was an accident.”

“There’s no way,” Hermione shook her head, still in disbelief. “A nundu has never been subdued with less than a hundred wizards. It’s simply not possible.”

Sirius grinned. “You don’t know our Harry too well obviously.”

“I just wanted to ride on its back,” Harry defended. “I didn’t even know it was here.”

Sirius was running his fingers through its silky smooth thick fur. “I bet it’s easier on your bits to ride something this soft.” Sirius grabbed a handful of loose skin with his only arm and climbed his way on top of the nundu. “Oh yeah, this would be great... I mean if you hadn’t killed it first.”

Harry just looked at the nundu in sorrow before smiling slightly. “It is cool seeing one up this close.”

Sirius clambered to his feet and stood triumphantly atop the nundu. “I’m the king of the jungle. Top of the bad-ass chain.” He was bouncing up and down, just trying to keep his balance. He looked down at the reflective multi-colored spots in the fur. “This thing is softer than my bed.”

“Sirius, get down,” Harry ordered.

"You're just jealous I got up here first," Sirius countered bouncing higher and higher on the swollen belly of the beast.

Harry saw Hermione walking around to the front examining the thick whiskers on the nundu. Harry pleaded, "Sirius, I really don't think you should-"

"Don't be such a baby," Sirius scolded while kicking his legs out with each successive jump as if he were on a trampoline. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Harry slowly opened his eyes having recognized the familiar sterile smell of a hospital and the feel of starched sheets. He looked up and saw Sirius closing the door behind him. He glanced to his left and saw the other bed in the room was occupied by Hermione.

"I've got muffins for everyone who's forgiven me," Sirius happily exclaimed.

"Hah," Hermione indignantly scoffed without even looking up.

"I said I was sorry," Sirius pleaded.

"You got banana nut?" Harry asked, trying to remember exactly why he was hospitalized again.

"That's the spirit," Sirius cheered handing Harry a muffin. "What about you, Hermione? Cream cheese or blueberry?"

Hermione's anger deflated momentarily. "Did you say cream cheese?"

Sirius happily passed her a muffin and watched as she greedily took a bite and sighed in contentment. "I knew you forgave me."

Harry looked over and saw Hermione's hair looked a lot frizzier than he remembered and he was briefly reminded of his former best friend. "My memory is still a bit fuzzy."

"Yeah," Sirius agreed. "The healers said this might happen."

Harry noticed Hermione wasn't as confused as him, but she was staying quiet. "I remember... oh crud. I remember a nundu. And... and watermelons?"

"Yeah," Sirius said, plopping down into the chair next to Harry's bed, staying a safe distance away from Hermione. "Okay, listen. Since we're all going to heal and be just fine, I can safely tell you that it was... *hilarious*."

"My breasts are purple!" Hermione scolded.

"And I told you I'll believe that when I see it," Sirius shouted back. He gently added, "Please?"

Hermione harrumphed and went back to giving Sirius the cold shoulder.

"Maybe later then," Sirius continued. "But I mean, have you ever seen those slow motion videos of a muggle standing in front of a cannon firing?"

Harry heard Hermione pout again and looked back at his godfather. "What?"

"Because it was *just* like that," Sirius cheered. "The way Hermione's body crumpled and her eyes bugged out when that watermelon came shooting out of the nundu's mouth and slammed right into her stomach."

Hermione was growling softly.

"And a little bit of her chest," Sirius corrected. "Or so she claims."

"I'm not showing you my tits," Hermione snapped.

"That's not what the Daily Prophet says," Sirius playfully whispered to Harry.

"What?" Harry questioned. "I mean... what?"

"What did you say?" Hermione asked looking straight at Sirius.

"Nothing," Sirius defended.

"You were supposed to bring the newspaper. Where is it?" Hermione demanded.

Sirius shook his head. "Not until you're nicer to me."

"Can you just tell me why..." Harry paused. "Hang on. You were jumping up and down on the nundu. That's why the watermelon blasted out of the dead nundu's mouth."

"You know that's one of those lines," Sirius idly commented, "that may never have been uttered before in all history."

"So why am I hospitalized and you're not?" Harry asked. He looked over at Hermione, "You should've killed him not me."

Hermione looked at Sirius. "Day's not over yet."

"Anyway," Sirius avoided Hermione's eyes and continued. "As it turns out, it appears the watermelon that had been blocking the airway and suffocated the nundu also was holding back the last of the nundu's poisonous breath."

"Oh dear," Harry commented as images came back to him. He turned to Hermione. "I threw up on you. Sorry about that."

Hermione was growling again.

"Yeah," Sirius agreed. "You two got the worst of the nundu's breath. I got my stomach pumped, arm attached, a couple potions, and released after an hour."

Harry looked down at his left arm. "So why is my arm bandaged?"

"That's Hermione's fault," Sirius said pointing his finger at the frowning young woman.

Harry looked at her and saw no explanation or apology coming. "Huh?"

"She wasn't crazy about being vomited on and shoved you-"

"He tripped," Hermione argued.

"Maybe a little of both," Sirius agreed. "But you fell backwards right into the open mouth of our dead nundu friend. Impaled yourself on a fang."

"That's right," Harry remembered with a smile looking at the bandage. "This will be even better than a tattoo with the matching basilisk scar on my the other arm."

"That was also when you managed to inhale the rest of the nundu's breath," Sirius added.

"Oh."

"Anyways, through my quick thinking," Sirius continued.

"Hah," Hermione scoffed again.

"I knew we needed your power to apparate us back to London. So I grabbed my arm, rounded up Hermione who was panicking-

"I think I was entitled to a little panic after you cracked three of my ribs," Hermione explained.

"And together we apparated into the lobby of St. Mungos," Sirius finished. "Which was especially entertaining, because you happened to bring the dead nundu you were impaled on with you."

"Nice," Harry cheered.

"Yeah, it was great," Sirius laughed. "Two people just fainted right at the sight of you all bloody, hanging halfway out a gigantic nundu's mouth. I was swinging my splinched arm around, demanding help and poking people. And then you two both started convulsing... classic. Good times."

"Excellent," Harry agreed and looked over to the horrified look on Hermione's face. "You okay?"

"That was not excellent," Hermione shrieked. "That was not classic. That was stupid and that was dangerous."

"Po-tay-toe, Po-tah-toe," Sirius retorted. "Didn't you have fun?"

"No," Hermione said. "You two even made my hair curl."

Harry nodded. "I was wondering if I was remembering that right."

"It gets frizzy when I'm stressed or worried," Hermione explained.

"I knew it," Harry triumphantly announced having always suspected he was to blame for that.

Sirius chuckled and jerked his thumb towards Harry. "Imagine going to school with this one."

Hermione paled and shook her head. "My nerves would never have survived, let alone my hair."

"You're made of stronger stuff than you think," Sirius assured her.

Hermione took that as a compliment and tried to smile. "May I please see the paper now?"

Sirius reached into his inner robe pocket and asked, "May I please see-"

"No," Hermione answered immediately.

"Fine," Sirius agreed and handed over the Daily Prophet. "Congratulations. We made the front page."

Hermione accepted the paper and looked at the top article. *Nundu Hunt Successful: Two Lord Blacks and one Ministry employee were all it took to subdue the most dangerous magical creature known to wizardkind.*

"I'm convulsing in the picture," Hermione complained.

"Harry's hanging out of the nundu's mouth *and* convulsing, so I don't think you really should be complaining," Sirius argued.

Hermione quickly scanned the article that made the supposed hunt sound far more dramatic and dangerous. Her name was mentioned several times as part of the trio of hunters but not in any way that offended her or made her sound bad. "This is all wrong, but I don't see why you didn't want me to read this."

Sirius looked at Harry briefly and quietly admitted, "There's another article on page three."

Harry saw the hesitancy in Sirius' statement and looked over at Hermione as she hurriedly opened the Prophet to page three.

"What!" Hermione shrieked. "What the hell is this?" She continued to mumble to herself as she read through the article.

"What is it?" Harry asked Sirius since it appeared Hermione wasn't going to be helpful.

"Turns out we're gay lovers," Sirius said with a shrug. "Rita Skeeter seems to think we're both tops and that's how we both managed to get the title of Lord."

Harry furrowed his brow. "What does that have to do with Hermione?"

Hermione interrupted as she loudly read, "*Once again thumbing their noses at tradition the Lords Black have chosen plain looking muggleborn Hermione Granger to carry their gay baby!* Who the hell does she think she is? Ohh, I am going to give this Rita Skeeter a piece of my mind."

"Gay baby?" Harry questioned. "That's not even proper writing. It makes it sound like our baby is gay."

"Well if you're gay and I'm gay," Sirius argued. "Then there's no way I'm raising any hetero baby. Not if I have anything to say about it."

"That's our baby," Harry scolded. "You will love it no matter what."

"See how easy that was?" Sirius grinned. "I'm the top, you're the bottom, acting like a sissy already."

"Why aren't you more upset by this?" Hermione questioned, realizing Harry and Sirius were joking about the article.

Harry looked at Sirius and back at Hermione. "Because it's not true?"

"Well," Sirius wavered. "They were right in that just the two of us went out and bought muggle pregnancy tests together."

Harry nodded. "You know that mixed with the whole dual Lords thing isn't really too much of a stretch."

"That's not the point," Hermione insisted. "These are outright boldfaced lies."

Harry tried to calm her. "Your picture is on the front page. People will know you're not plain looking."

"Thank you," Hermione smiled at the compliment before going back on her angry rant. "But reporters can't just make up stories because they want to."

Sirius wagged his finger. "You weren't this upset even though you said the front page article was all wrong."

"Well, if you want," Harry suggested. "I'm pretty sure Rita Skeeter has the illegal animagus form of a beetle. You could use that to blackmail her."

"Two wrongs don't make a right," Hermione argued.

"But seven lefts do," Sirius helpfully added earning a few odd looks.

"Or you could capture her in her animagus form and keep her locked in a jar for a year," Harry offered.

Hermione frowned harshly. "Not even you idiots are that cruel. Kidnapping and holding her hostage for a year is more than a touch extreme."

Harry glanced at Sirius and shrugged.

“Besides,” Hermione explained. “People would notice she was missing and be looking for her everywhere.”

Harry rubbed his chin in thought. “You’d think so, wouldn’t you?”

“No,” Hermione shook her head decisively. “I’m going to write a letter to the editor and if they don’t print a retraction then I’m going to pursue a civil suit against her and the Daily Prophet.”

Harry was about to comment on how crazy that idea was when a healer entered the room.

“Our potions lab has just finished mixing your salve, Miss Granger,” the healer said while handing her a decent sized white jar. “The bruising was extremely deep but rub this into the affected area twice a day and it should be gone within a week.”

“Thank you,” Hermione replied. “So am I free to go?”

“Take it easy for the next day or so, but yes,” the healer smiled as he turned to leave. “You are free to go.”

She ran into the bathroom and changed into her cleaned robes. When she came back out, she looked over at Harry and Sirius and realized this was goodbye.

Sirius offered, “If you need any help with that rubbing-”

“Stop.” Hermione was fighting the urge to curse him and wondered just when she got so violent. “I know... well I suspect anyway, that you two had good intentions, but please... don’t do me any more favors.” She turned to walk out the door.

“Wait,” Harry called out. “At least you can appreciate your unfortunately boring life a bit more, now, right?”

Hermione’s face twitched at the phrase but found herself quickly agreeing with the sentiment. “Maybe.”

“So if you ever need a dose of excitement,” Harry offered and given the look on her face added, “perhaps a smaller one, something like

dinner, or a big brother to talk to the ex-boyfriend who can't take a hint. Just give us a shout, okay?"

Hermione's face softened showing no real hard feelings. "Give me a couple years to think it over. Goodbye Harry, Sirius."

Harry and Sirius waved goodbye as the Hermione of this world walked out of the room.

"There goes the mother of our gay baby," Sirius wistfully commented.

Harry turned to Sirius. "Whatever happened to the nundu?"

Sirius smiled brightly. "All taken care of. And I broke into Hermione's place and left her a present in her living room."

"Oh?"

"No, not the Padfoot kind," Sirius clarified. "She's got a brand new coffee table with four of the sturdiest legs with giant paws you'll ever see."

"Nice."

Sirius shrugged. "It should make for a good conversation piece."

"And us?"

"Great big nundu skin rug in front of the fire place," Sirius said with a lecherous grin. "And a mounted head that still has your blood on its teeth."

Harry smiled just picturing it. "*Man*, we're cool."

"Hard to believe we didn't completely win over Hermione yet," Sirius agreed.

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, I'm not sure the Hermione of this world is prepared to live in ours."

"No?"

“But I know the Hermione I grew up with would definitely appreciate our efforts to loosen her up a bit.” Harry frowned. “Assuming she wasn’t completely jealous of her hair.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Are you sure this is the place?”

Harry nodded. “You remember the oculamagi spell I taught you?”

“Yeah,” Sirius grumbled. “But that one gives me a headache. Can’t I just use the one I normally do? Or the omnioculars?”

“The one you normally use is the one built into the omnioculars.”

“Perfect,” Sirius cheered.

“How many times do we have to do this?”

“But I like the omnioculars.”

“I do too,” Harry agreed. “The omnioculars are great for heat signatures, seeing through solid objects, recording, playback, zooming, and settling arguments over estimated nipple size. But for seeing magic, only the simple and generic spells can be put on them. You could cast the same spell on a window, my glasses, or any other object. The spell I taught you goes deeper into optical perception for when you need to see the real differences in magics, the subtle nuances.”

Sirius frowned. “This is going to be a learning experience, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and besides, what I’m about to do could just about blind you if you used your spell. Now come on,” Harry urged.

Sirius was pouting but cast the spell over his eyes and turned towards Harry.

“Watch carefully,” Harry said before clapping his hands together, sending out a wave of magic. Harry pointed over to their left. “There. Did you see it?”

Sirius looked in the direction Harry pointed. “No, I didn’t see anything.”

“Look right there and pay attention,” Harry said, clapping his hands together again.

Sirius blinked. “I missed it. Do it again.”

Harry clapped out another heavier wave.

Sirius turned to Harry hopelessly and complained, “I don’t see anything.”

“Turn around,” Harry said as he clapped and sent a wave behind them. “See how various spots appear dependent on their innate absorption of the magic?”

“Sort of,” Sirius agreed.

“Now look this way,” Harry said repeating the gesture in the original direction.

“No spots?” Sirius asked. “That’s what I’m supposed to see?”

Harry nodded. “That is the sign of a weakened Fidelius charm.”

“How could you possibly see-” Sirius quickly changed directions realizing what Harry said. “We’re breaking down a *Fidelius*? I didn’t think that was possible.”

“It only works when the secret keeper is dead,” Harry explained. “If you know the general area, you can find a spot that’s hiding magic, then you flood the surroundings, and you can locate the keystone. If the secret keeper is alive though, you won’t get anything.”

“How long did it take you to find this?”

“Long enough,” Harry said walking up to where he believed the Fidelius to be.

“And you’re sure this place is abandoned?”

Harry shrugged. “It’s an old bunker Grindelwald used for human experimentation. Some wizards, mainly women and children though.”

Sirius turned to stare at Harry. "Well that's pleasant."

Harry nodded. "I'm going to flood the area. You should see the anchor stones start to light up. The red one is the keystone. When you know where the keystone is, blast the bloody hell out of it. Once it's moved enough, the Fidelius will come crashing down."

Sirius felt a headache forming but nodded, keeping his eyes open. "Do it to it."

Harry cast a large scale net and began to expel wild unformed magic. On the scale required, Harry knew it would be tiring but was confident he could manage it.

"Anytime you're ready," Sirius chided.

"You've got the easy part," Harry whined as his body began to tremble. He kept funneling more and more magic into his net, trying to ignore the exhaustion he felt.

"You want some sex to go with that wine?"

Harry snorted before grunting under the effort. "Don't make me laugh."

Sirius happily taunted. "Well then probably shouldn't look at my-ooof!" Sirius crumpled to the ground as an invisible arm punched him in the crotch. Sirius' voice went up two octaves and squeaked out, "You bastard."

"Dammit," Harry said, closing his eyes trying not to lose his hold on the net. "Come on, hurry up and blast it."

Sirius took his sweet time getting back up, easily spotting the five anchor stones glowing brightly as the magic of the net became thicker. One of the points of the pentagon had turned pink and was unmistakably the keystone. "None of them are red yet."

"Keep... looking," Harry wheezed, forcing more magic out.

"Does dark pink count for anything?"

“Padfoot!” Harry snapped.

“Fine,” Sirius grumbled as he carefully aimed his wand and fired four quick blasting curses one after the other. The sudden precise jolt shifted the keystone just enough.

The air around them lit up brightly and Harry finally let go of his hold on the magical net. “Oh, thank Merlin.”

Sirius watched entranced as multi-colored sparks began to wink in and out of existence through the air. It started slowly with just a few specks here and there before turning into a shower of magic crashing down. A loud crack echoed around the clearing and a thick metal door was visible where there used to be none.

“You’re sure this thing is empty?” Sirius asked walking up to the rusty door.

“Wait,” Harry panted out, hunched over, catching his breath. He dug up a pepper-up potion and swallowed it down.

“What is it?” Sirius asked. “Is the door booby-trapped?”

“No,” Harry said shaking his head. “There’s nothing on the door. Probably so you’ll relax and let your guard down.”

“So we’re not going in the door?”

“No, we are,” Harry said standing up and opening the door. “Just... how do feel about the sound of children screaming while being burnt alive?”

Sirius looked at Harry oddly. “I suppose I would be against the sound of burning, screaming children.”

Harry waved Sirius on down the concrete stairwell. “If this is anything like I expect, then... well, remember how I said Grindelwald used this for experimentation?”

Sirius stopped and looked at Harry. “There’s really creepy stuff and creepy kids in here, aren’t there?”

"Some of the experiments didn't exactly die. Frankly, I'm not sure they could. And it's very possible they've..." Harry's voice dropped and he mumbled the words, "bendurned inna livinafury."

"You mind repeating that so that I can understand it?" Sirius insisted. "You know I'm not moving until you do."

"I was saying it's likely there are mutated living Inferi children just inside that door," Harry said pointing towards the end of the corridor they were in.

"Living Inferi?" Sirius repeated incredulously. "Why do dark wizards have to keep out-eviling each other?"

Harry shrugged. "For the same reason they also act like peacocks, trying to be more dignified and slick talking than everyone else?"

Sirius frowned. "Uncontrollable homosexual urges?"

"I was thinking daddy issues," Harry replied. "But that was as good an answer as any."

"Fire kills them?"

"Dark wizards? Usually."

"Not dark wizards," Sirius grumbled. "The living Inferi."

"Oh them. Yeah, fire holds them back," Harry explained. "I'm not so sure they can be destroyed considering the body keeps moving even if you cut off the head."

"Lovely," Sirius commented.

Harry swirled his wand creating a fire whip that encircled and protected his body. "I'll go for the cube. You make sure the door doesn't close behind us."

Sirius copied Harry's motion and was also surrounded by a spiral of fire. "I can do that."

Harry nodded. "Ready?"

Sirius nodded back, keeping a constant distance between them, so as not to burn each other.

“Go,” Harry called out swinging the door open and running into the dark chamber. He sent a lumos charm up to the ceiling illuminating the room, as several decaying zombie like young girls all came to life.

Sirius stood just inside the door, watching a dozen of the creatures focus their attention on Harry. He sent off a couple of basic incendio charms when a half dozen of the freakish zombie children turned towards him.

Sirius winced as they started screaming but kept coming. He glanced over and saw Harry vault up the first step towards the altar at the end of the room.

Harry took one step up the stairs when a blue spell came zipping out of the darkness and rammed into his abdomen with the force of a dozen bludgers. His cloak absorbed some of the impact but he was launched bodily through the air sliding to a stop halfway between the altar and Sirius.

Harry groaned in extreme pain.

“Harry?” Sirius asked curiously.

“Not... part... of the plan.”

Sirius saw the Inferi started chattering nonsensically and were quickly converging on Harry. “Dammit,” he swore, turning to the nearest Inferi. He released the ring of fire surrounding him and cast a cutting curse straight at the young girl’s neck, slicing cleanly through. A banishing charm sent her body flying backwards and he quickly grabbed her slimy head by the hair. He positioned it as a makeshift doorstop holding the metal chamber’s exit open.

Sirius charged towards Harry letting loose fire charms and whips the whole way. “Stay down!” he ordered sending waves of fire straight over the top of Harry’s body.

“Not a problem,” Harry wheezed, grateful for the assistance.

As soon as Sirius was close enough, he re-cast the ring of fire to protect himself and Harry from the screaming Inferi children.

"You okay?" Sirius asked noticing Harry had started to sit up before collapsing back to the ground.

"Why is it always my ribs that break?"

Sirius answered right away. "Because your arm or leg would be much harder to deal with."

Harry rolled over onto his belly. "Good point." He was able to push himself up and smiled weakly at his godfather. "Thanks."

Sirius pulled Harry up to his feet. "I didn't see what happened. Just saw you doing your impression of a watermelon in a nundu's mouth."

"I don't know," Harry commented putting pressure on his lower ribcage. He looked through the flames of Sirius' protection as a scraggly ancient looking figure emerged from the shadows. "What the fuck..."

Sirius saw the pale withered looking man catch the light of the lumos above. His flesh was similar to the Inferi, decaying horribly. He had an empty eye socket that appeared to be a black bottomless pit. "Does that guy look familiar to you?"

The old twisted man's posture shifted into a much more imposing stance. He lifted a thin bony hand and another blue spell erupted straight from his palm headed straight for the Lord Blacks.

Harry's invisible magical arms grabbed the nearest mutant Inferi and held it up in the path of the curse. It exploded with a wet shower of pungent decay as the half-blocked spelled collided with them both.

Sirius' fire shield dissipated as they were knocked to the floor.

"Fuck," Sirius grumbled.

Harry hurriedly cast three incendiary spells setting the nearest approaching Inferi alight with purple flames. "Get that fire shield

around us,” Harry instructed as he cast a strong magical shield to deflect the next powerful blue spell headed their way.

Sirius sent a line flames spiraling around them, preventing any Inferi from reaching them as the old zombie wizard’s spell reflected off Harry’s shield and crashed into the ceiling. “Who or what is that thing?”

Harry sent a blasting curse at the wispy old silent man.

The pale figure just held the same hand up and absorbed the incoming spell.

“Dammit,” Harry swore. He glanced at Sirius and made sure the Inferi weren’t getting to close. “What it is, I’m really not sure. But who... well... I think that’s the body of Grindelwald.”

“What?” Sirius squeaked glancing at the man sending another blue spell their way. “I thought Dumbledore killed him.”

Harry shook his head and answered quietly over the still screaming young female Inferi. “Not sure about this world, but in ours, Dumbledore defeated him. He just didn’t exactly kill him.”

“What’d he do?” Sirius asked flinching as another blue spell got a bit too close for comfort.

Harry shrugged. “Albus’ portrait didn’t know the exact magic, and even if it did, it wouldn’t have told me. But I’m pretty sure he sort of... eradicated his soul.”

“Oh, is that all?”

Harry shrugged. “If the same thing happened here, and someone were to have tried resurrecting him, unaware of the condition of the former Dark Lord’s everlasting soul, well,” Harry nodded towards the decaying old wizard. “I reckon that might be what happens. No soul, no mind, just a dumb, powerful semi-animated weapon.”

“Think we can take him?” Sirius questioned, sending flames towards more nearing Inferi.

Harry deflected another blue spell into far wall. It let out a loud clang as it hit and the whole chamber shook. Harry sighed. "I think we better try soon or he's going to bring this bunker down on top of us."

"I don't suppose they forgot to protect the cube from summoning?"

Harry shook his head. "It looks like it takes the Grindel-zombie a second or two to absorb spells, and he's chained to the wall. The closer we get the harder it'll be to avoid those impact blasts. On the plus side, that's all it seems able to cast." Harry turned towards the loud Inferi that kept coming. He shouted back, "And at least he's not screaming like these other bitches!"

Sirius saw how irritated Harry was getting and asked, "Feel better now?"

"No." Harry frowned. "*Shit!*" He hurriedly tried to block the blue spell, just barely getting a shield up in time, though he was knocked off his feet, dangerously close to the flames of Sirius' fire cage.

"Careful," Sirius warned holding Harry back and helping him to his feet. "We're over-thinking this one," Sirius said, canceling his ring of fire and tossing Harry his wand. "Cover me."

Harry snatched the wand from midair as Sirius transformed into his animagus form and began to run straight towards the poorly animated corpse of Grindelwald. Harry used Sirius' wand to cast a fire whip that he swung over his head like a lasso, fending off screeching Inferi children, while he used his own wand to send spell after spell towards Grindelwald.

The decrepit wraith-like thing was too busy absorbing spells from Harry to cast anything at the large black dog sprinting towards him.

Sirius bounded up the steps and leapt onto the altar. He grabbed Ravenclaw's cube in his mouth as his momentum took him sliding off the back side of the altar.

Harry was trying to hold back all the Inferi while still raining spells down on Grindelwald but he was tiring too quickly.

A blue spell rocketed at Sirius' back but the animagus was running in so many random directions that it flew past, missing him and crashed into the ground. Unfortunately the canine's surprise at the close call took him right into the path of Harry's fire whip. There was a loud sizzle as it burnt Sirius' tail.

Sirius had a mouthful of founder's artifact and could only whimper and whine as he barreled by Harry. He leapt straight over the slimy Inferi girl's head still serving as a door stop and was clear of the hazardous chamber.

Harry saw Grindelwald's body seemed to be turning greener and shaking from all the magic it had absorbed. His instincts were telling him something bad was about to happen. He turned and ran right after Sirius, kicking the girl's head out of the way, as the heavy metal door clanged shut when an impact spell slammed into it.

Sirius had transformed back and was rubbing his bottom with a painful wince. "You burnt my tail."

"Not now," Harry snapped, pulling Sirius with him as he dashed for the exit.

Sirius felt the bunker begin to shake and realized Harry running away was a sign he should be running too. He gripped the cube tighter and took the stairs three at a time up and out of the bunker.

Harry swung the metal door shut and pulled the handle sealing it closed. He relaxed momentarily and saw Sirius was as winded as he was.

The ground rumbled threateningly and Sirius looked at Harry. "Maybe we should..."

"Good idea," Harry agreed and the two of them started to run further away from the bunker as the entire forest shook from the massive underground explosion.

The metal door was launched high into the air as a column of pungent black and brown flames kissed the tree tops.

Harry had tumbled to the ground, right near Sirius and was watching the night sky. He pointed out the falling door as it came crashing down, landing with a thud embedded into the soil.

Harry once again let out the breath he had been holding and laid back tiredly. "What was that *cover me*?"

"It worked, didn't it?" Sirius said handing the cube to Harry.

Harry accepted one of Rowena Ravenclaw's less famous inventions and wondered if it had ever been coated in so much dog slobber before. "Yeah, it did."

"You didn't have to burn my tail," Sirius grumbled rubbing his sore bottom.

Harry frowned. "And you didn't have to force me to cover you with my broken ribs without giving me a second's pause."

"Again with the whining," Sirius chided with a smile. "No one likes a wimp, Harry."

Harry grumbled. "Come on. Let's drop this off at home and get to St. Mungos."

Sirius stood up and helped Harry to his feet. "We really should look into hiring our own healer."

Harry grunted his assent. "That's actually a good idea."

Sirius' eyes glittered mischievously. "I bet Sarah would make a house call for you."

"Die."

"Mmm," Tonks moaned happily. "I swear the house elves must hide the good ice cream for you because it was never this tasty when I was a student."

Lily licked her spoon and asked, "What flavor you got there?"

Tonks turned her tub around to look at the handwritten label. "Butterscotch Fudge Chunk Delight."

"That is a good one," Lily said snagging a spoonful from Tonks' tub. "Try this."

Tonks scooped a heaping spoonful of swirled pink and white from Lily's tub. She put it in her mouth and let out a contented sigh. "That's nummy."

"Cherry Marshmallow Cheesecake," Lily announced, pointing at her tub. "This one's low fat frozen yogurt."

"That's not low fat," Tonks argued. "No way."

"That's what the house elves tell me," Lily insisted. She tried to hide her little smirk as she added, "Although, I may have instructed the house elves to lie to me a little bit."

Tonks pat her chest a little bit and let out a loud echoing belch. "Wow. That even tasted good the second time."

Lily raised a curious eyebrow. "Are you challenging the champion?"

"Let's see what you got," Tonks taunted.

Lily opened her mouth and swallowed a gulp of air. She raised her hand and repeated with another gulp before letting loose a deep reverberating burp, more than twice as loud and long as Tonks' had been.

A house elf appeared with a pop. "Did youse call for me, Missum Potter?"

Tonks had to look away, because she was struggling to hold back her laughter.

Lily waved off the confused and curious elf. "No, Irma. If I did, I didn't mean to."

"Okay," Irma the house elf happily replied and popped away.

Tonks gave up holding back and outright laughed at Lily.

Lily raised an arm in victory. "Still the King."

"You summoned a house elf," Tonks said through her snickering. "That's a magical gift if I've ever seen one."

"Not a gift," Lily insisted. "It took years and years of practice."

"James must be so proud," Tonks said, wiping away a fake tear. She grabbed another spoonful from Lily's tub.

Lily shook her head. "He'd probably ask Madame Pomfrey to give me a check-up."

"Your husband doesn't know?" Tonks gasped and mischievously grinned. "What to do with this morsel of blackmail. What to do..."

"You will do nothing," Lily said, shaking her spoon at Tonks. "Unless you want your Dad to hear about how lovely your graduation party really was."

"Oh lordy," Tonks happily recalled. "One of these days it'll be you calling me to bring clothes and bail money. Then, then I shall I regain the upper hand."

Lily smiled. "Just think how much you've matured since those days."

Tonks sighed. "I really don't have any good blackmail material on you, do I?"

Lily shook her head proudly.

"I've got tons on Sarah," Tonks idly commented. "But nothing juicy on you."

"You've got-" Lily had to pause and squint, tilting to the side as she passed gas. "You've got what on Sarah?"

"Nuh-uh," Tonks retorted. "It does me no good if I were to tell you."

"Come on," Lily urged, letting out another squeaking fart. "You can tell me."

"Maybe once the statute of limitations has passed," Tonks cruelly hinted. She made a face and leaned back, "You're putting some stink out."

Lily shrugged unconcerned. "Ice cream always gives me the toots."

"Speaking of the toots," Tonks smoothly segued. "What did you and Harry talk about when you two snuck off?"

Lily smirked. "Why Tonks Lupin, do I sense... *jealousy*?"

"Oh please," Tonks shook her head. "You're the last person I'd be jealous of when it concerns Harry."

"What's that supposed to..." Lily stopped as her eyes widened. "You know!"

Tonks blanched and tried to backtrack. "Know? Know what? What did he tell you?"

"You know why we both feel weird around each other," Lily insisted. "You know what he's hiding."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tonks lied unconvincingly.

Lily didn't believe her. "Phooey. He's your Lord too."

Tonks shook her head. "He only plays the Lord card when it's advantageous for me."

"Of course you know what he's hiding," Lily realized. "You've slept with him enough."

"I'm not sure 'enough' is a word I would've ever used," Tonks said with a grin. Her smile faltered, suddenly remembering who she was talking to.

"So," Lily cajoled. "What's it like? Rough? Gentle?"

Tonks began to feel uncomfortable.

“Is he big?”

Tonks began to feel really uncomfortable.

“Oh relax,” Lily said swatting Tonks’ shoulder at the face she was making. “I would never cheat on James. But that doesn’t mean you can’t share all the juicy, carnal details.”

“It’s... fine.”

“It’s more than fine,” Lily argued. “Or you wouldn’t have kept coming back, what is it, three, maybe four times?”

“A few more than that,” Tonks admitted. “But it’s not what you think. He’s a friend. We go out drinking. Some nights, I’ll meet someone. Some nights, I won’t. It’s the same for him. And on some of those nights when neither of us is going home with someone, we’ll just... go home together.”

“If you say so,” Lily half-heartedly agreed.

“Every unattached girl should have a spare wand she can call on when she needs it.”

Lily innocently asked, “And just how many inches is that spare wand?”

Tonks chortled at having walked into that one. “You are horrible.”

“Just looking out for my girl,” Lily grinned. “You know I consider you family.”

“I know,” Tonks grinned, tilting to the side as she too let out a little flatulence. “It’s just... *weird* talking to you about Harry.”

“Why is it weird?”

“It’s just...” Tonks stopped herself from saying too much. “Never mind.”

"You're the one who brought him up," Lily pointed out, scraping the bottom of her tub for one last spoonful.

"Well I wanted to know what *you* thought of him," Tonks argued.

"But not because you're feeling protective or jealous over him," Lily said.

"No more protective or jealous than I would over Jimmy," Tonks assured her. "Like you said, we're family. And so is Harry." Tonks quickly added, "For me."

"I certainly hope you don't have the same sort of feelings for Jimmy that you do for Harry," Lily warned.

"He *has* gotten pretty cute," Tonks playfully commented.

"Tonks!"

"I'm just kidding," Tonks assured her raising both hands in surrender. "In case you forgot, I changed more than a couple of Jimmy's diapers."

Lily grumbled. "You probably changed more than his father did."

"But if you really want to know," Tonks said. "I was asking what you thought of Harry, so that I could make fun of him, next time I see him. Not because I'm jealous."

Lily was scrutinizing Tonks trying to figure out what exactly that implied. "Truthfully, I'm not sure what to make of him."

"He's a good guy," Tonks assured her.

"He's definitely cute," Lily admitted. "In some ways he reminds me of how I envisioned James to be."

Tonks knew she was treading into dangerous territory. "Really?" she said unable to keep the squeak from her voice.

Lily nodded. "You never really knew us that well before we lost our Harry, but James was a lot more..." she paused trying to think of the

best word. "Happy. He laughed all the time and got into a lot of harmless trouble. When he was with Sirius, not your Lord, but Harry's godfather Sirius... those two caused so much havoc. Kinda like the way the two Lord Blacks are, now that I think about it."

Tonks smiled sadly, silently urging Lily to continue.

"I never realized just how much of that was Sirius' influence on him," Lily admitted. "Losing Harry was enough to break both of us, but losing his best friend too... it was like James decided he had to grow up in an instant. In some ways, I think he blamed Sirius as much as he blamed himself for Harry's death."

Tonks nodded. "I've heard some stories from Dad and seen pictures, but even still it's hard to imagine James that way."

"I love my husband dearly," Lily agreed. "But even I, sometimes, think he needs a little more..." She swallowed another mouthful of air and let loose a thick, guttural burp.

Tonks snickered happily. "You are the King."

The two women looked up as Sarah Potter walked in the room.

Sarah saw her mother and Tonks lying on opposites ends of the couch in Lily Potter's staff quarters. She sniffed the air twice and frowned. "Have you been eating ice cream?"

Tonks and Lily both just laughed in response.

"I take it Dad's not here?"

Lily shook her head. "He's working late tonight."

"Well in that case," Sarah looked both ways and pushed out her stomach as she let fly a fart that put even Lily's belching to shame.

"Good lord," Tonks snickered.

"I've been holding that in since lunch," Sarah explained as she walked over towards the chill-cabinet and grabbed a tub of ice cream.

“Yeah,” Lily smiled weakly. “At that, my daughter is the King.”

“It sounded like you were drowning a kelpie,” Tonks vividly described.

“Tell me about it,” Sarah grumbled plopping down into the empty chair. “You know, one time, I actually summoned a house elf.”

Tonks just laughed and pointed at Lily.

“How was your day?” Lily asked, not in the mood to explain to her daughter.

“Tiring,” Sarah said digging into her tub of Double Mocha Peanut Butter. “I think I pissed Poppy off. She made me clean and organize the entire store room.”

“Better than bedpan duty,” Tonks offered.

“Don’t remind me,” Sarah said with a grimace. Her face brightened as she turned to Tonks, “But I ran into someone very interesting at the Hog’s Head the other night.”

“Oh yeah?” Tonks asked glancing towards Lily.

Sarah smiled devilishly and she swallowed a mouthful of ice cream. “A certain adorably cute Lord Harry Black was flirting with me.”

“What?” Tonks scoffed out before she could stop herself.

Lily and Sarah both turned towards Tonks. Lily smirked, “Care to revise your opinion on jealousy?”

Tonks opened her mouth, unable to think of what to say.

“Relax,” Sarah assured her. “Nothing happened. Not that I was opposed to the idea, but he got all freaked out when he realized who I was and who my parents were. Thanks a lot for that, Mum.”

The relief on Tonks’ face was clear as day. Lily noticed it and asked, “If it’s not jealousy-”

“It’s not,” Tonks interjected.

“Then it must be that something else you know,” Lily added. “Care to share?”

Tonks bit her bottom lip and added, “You know what? Let’s go with jealousy.”

“You’re no fun,” Lily pouted and turned towards her daughter. “And you, young lady, need to stop thinking about Lord Harry Black that way.”

“What’s going on?” Sarah asked, waggling her spoon between Tonks and her mother.

“There’s something funny about him,” Lily explained and saw Tonks wasn’t going to be forthcoming. “Tonks knows what it is.”

“What is it?” Sarah asked curiously.

Tonks shook her head. “No way. My lips are sealed.”

“So you *do* know his secrets,” Lily grinned victoriously.

Tonks pretended to zip her lips shut and shook her head.

The two female Potters were all set to pounce on Tonks, who was increasingly feeling as if she were cornered. She was saved by the appearance of James Potter.

“I’ve been doing paperwork for seven hours straight,” James complained as he walked into his wife’s quarters. “And I... good lord. What’s that smell?”

Lily flashed a look at Tonks and Sarah, calmly answering, “Your son let off a dung bomb earlier.”

James shook his head. “I swear it’s those Lord Blacks. They’re a bad influence on him.”

“You know what? It’s late,” Tonks said jumping up. “I should get going. See you tomorrow, boss. Night Lily, Sarah.”

“Good night, Tonks,” James said as she hurried out the portrait. He walked back towards the bedroom taking off his wand holsters as he went. He stuck his head back in the front room and added distastefully, “It was a super dung bomb, wasn’t it?”

Lily had to gulp and cover her mouth to hide her amusement.

James smiled at his wife, turning back towards the bedroom. “You and your dainty little burps.”

Bellatrix cast a lumos charm, illuminating the darkened room. “Huh.”

Hundreds of portraits covered all four walls like a rogue’s gallery of angry and disgruntled stares.

“Well that’s... different.”

“She’s a Black,” Phineas Nigellus announced from his frame by the door.

“Have you come to help us?” a harsh looking old woman asked.

Bellatrix frowned. “Help you? Help you with what?”

“She doesn’t know,” Phineas explained, narrowing his eyes at Bellatrix. “Those two Lords of yours have locked and bound us all to our frames.”

Bellatrix looked around the room recognizing many names and families, suddenly putting two and two together. “Ohhh.”

“Yes,” Phineas mocked. “Oh.”

“I don’t think I’m supposed to be in here,” Bellatrix admitted. She saw the look on Phineas’ face and added, “And what are you doing here? You’re a Black.”

“Those thieves are trying to enslave portraits’ loyalty to create some sort of cockamamie spy network,” Phineas explained.

"But you're a Black," Bellatrix repeated. "Weren't you painted and charmed to the family?"

"One of his portraits was," Harry answered from the door. "But that's the frame I swiped from the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts."

"Oh," Bellatrix turned around and saw Harry did not look pleased. "I'm not supposed to be here, am I?"

"You shouldn't have even been able to find this room," Harry said with a frown.

"I asked Kreacher if there were any other rooms to explore and he led me here."

"Kreacher!" Harry shouted.

Kreacher didn't appear with a pop but slowly walked down the hall, grumbling to himself stopping outside the door. "Stupid mudblood Master. Yelling louder. Kreacher doesn't care. Punish Kreacher. Kreacher will make babies cry-"

"Shut up," Harry ordered forcefully.

"Yes Master," Kreacher acquiesced despite being clearly proud of his actions.

Harry was tempted to just punt the troublesome servant but restrained himself.

Bellatrix suggested, "I'll kill him, if you don't want to."

Harry paused to consider the offer.

"I'm trying to quit smoking, drinking, and the Unforgivables for the duration of my pregnancy, but one little curse here and there shouldn't hurt."

Harry looked over at Bellatrix.

"Or you could just obliviate him," she said.

Kreacher looked up in surprise. "You know how to memory charm house elves?"

"*Obliviate*," Harry instinctually cast on Kreacher. "I really wish people would stop saying that."

"What's up?" Sirius asked walking down the hall. He saw Bellatrix looked ashamed. "What's she doing here?"

"Kreacher led her here," Harry said.

"I thought he couldn't even get in," Sirius said, keeping his guard up.

Harry looked over at Bellatrix.

"He probably can't," Bellatrix admitted. "He snapped his fingers opening the door when I couldn't see it."

Sirius glanced at Bellatrix warily and whispered to Harry, "Does she...?"

"I think she's probably figured it out," Harry skeptically replied, wondering if his godfather was drunk.

"You're thieves!" a portrait shouted. "The pureblood bandits!"

"Death Eater bandits," Sirius shouted back.

"That's never been proven," almost two dozen portraits screamed back in unison.

"Who are you trying to convince?" Sirius argued loudly.

"Umm... guys?" Bellatrix interjected. "My Lords?"

Harry pulled Sirius away and shut the door to the portrait room, silencing all the extra voices immediately. He turned to Bellatrix expectantly. "Hmm?"

"I know I've sworn loyalty," Bellatrix said. "But if it's all the same to you, I think you should obliviate me."

Harry and Sirius looked at each other in surprise.

"You didn't want me to know this, I didn't want me to know this, and I think we're all better off if I don't know this," she explained.

Harry and Sirius just stared at Bellatrix waiting for the catch.

"Idiot Masters probably can't even cast a memory charm," Kreacher grumbled to himself.

"Shut up you wretched little turdnugget," Sirius snapped. "We've obliterated you plenty!"

Kreacher's head snapped up. "You know how to memory charm-"

"*Obliviate*," Harry tiredly cast on the disgruntled house elf. "God dammit Sirius. You make me do that too many times and it'll fry his brain."

Sirius glanced at the glassy-eyed elf. "And that would be bad why exactly?"

Harry opened his mouth before snapping it shut with a click. He looked at Kreacher and instructed, "Go to the top floor and clean the attic. Don't leave that floor unless we call for you."

Kreacher popped away instantly, unable to creatively interpret such a clear and specific order.

"That bugger's become a liability," Sirius said.

Harry nodded. "I know."

"Hello?" Remus yelled out from the living room. "Sirius? Harry? Bellatrix? Anyone home?"

"Go stall Moony," Harry instructed. "I'll obliviate her and be right out."

"Oh come on, I wanted to," Sirius begged.

Harry turned to Bellatrix. "Your call."

“Harry,” she said immediately.

“Good call,” Harry said with a grin.

“Bitch,” Sirius snapped.

“You’re just jealous because she likes me more than you,” Harry retorted.

Sirius frowned before smiling and patting Harry on the back. “Thanks Harry. I feel better when you put it like that.” Sirius turned and walked towards the living room. “I’m here, Moony!”

Bellatrix sighed. “You’re never going to like me, are you?”

Harry shrugged. “To be honest at this point, it doesn’t have much to do with you. We just like *not liking* you. Although, I do know one way you could get into me and Sirius’ good graces...”

“Yeah?” Bellatrix asked hopefully. “Actually, why don’t you tell me *after* obliterating me?”

“Good point,” Harry agreed, drawing his wand, and freezing her in place.

“Hey Padfoot,” Remus greeted. “Where is everybody? Bellatrix wasn’t in her room.”

“I don’t know,” Sirius said scratching his chin. “You think she rejoined the Death Eaters?”

“Sirius,” Remus tiredly said, showing he was not amused.

“Oh relax,” Sirius said. “Harry’s with her. They just had to do something real quick. They’ll be out in a second.”

“What did they have to do?” Remus asked.

Sirius hesitated for a moment, trying to think of a suitably funny and insulting response.

“Padfoot,” Remus sighed. “Just tell me the truth. Is it about the baby?”

“Yes,” Sirius answered immediately. “It’s about the baby.”

“You’re lying.”

“Yes,” Sirius replied without pause. “I’m lying.”

“I’m going to check on her,” Remus said getting worried.

“Wait,” Sirius said stopping him.

“What?”

“Don’t interrupt them,” Sirius said.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m supposed to stall you.”

“That’s it,” Remus decided. “I’m checking on her.”

“How you doing, Moony?” Harry said walking into the living room.

“Harry,” Remus asked. “What did you do to her?”

Harry frowned at Sirius. “What did you tell him?”

“Nothing,” Sirius insisted. “I was just stalling him.”

“You know telling someone you’re stalling them,” Harry criticized, “is poor stalling technique.”

“Lying didn’t work too well either,” Sirius admitted with a shrug.

“Will someone just give me a straight answer,” Remus whined.

“I had to obliviate her,” Harry said. “That’s all.”

“What?” Remus asked in confusion. “Why would you obliviate her?”

“Because I asked him to,” Bellatrix replied entering the room.

“There you are,” Remus said in relief. “Wait, why would you ask him to?”

Bellatrix shrugged. “If I knew the answer to that, then he probably didn’t do a very good job obliterating me.”

Remus frowned. “And you’re okay with that?”

“They’re my Lords,” Bellatrix admitted with a shrug. “If they were willing, I’m sure I had a good reason.”

“You want to watch a movie?” Harry asked Sirius.

“Yeah,” Sirius said. “Moony’s probably just going to poke the little fetus in the eye. Put up a silencing charm, would you?”

“We’re not gonna-” Remus defended.

Bellatrix interjected. “We’re not?”

Remus quickly looked at her and shut up. He weakly added, “Never mind,” as Bellatrix dragged him up to her room.

Sirius just shook his head. “That’s one fucked up couple.”

“You are quite the matchmaker,” Harry said as they walked into the muggle room with their home theater.

Sirius flopped down into the couch. “Yeah. When my pranks backfire, they backfire big.”

“You know, I said I’d give her a shot to get in our good graces,” Harry said peering around the corner towards Bellatrix’s door.

Sirius paused to think it over and asked, “She’s getting a new face?”

Harry shook his head and cast a spell on her bedroom door. “Nope.”

Immediately, the sounds coming from the bedroom were magnified and echoing throughout Grimmauld Place. Bodies shifting and moving could be heard quite clearly in the midst of some heavy breathing.

"If you want, I still have that memory," Sirius said recalling the time he'd silently observed them waiting for Remus to notice him.

"Shh," Harry shushed, listening in.

"Oh Remus," Bellatrix moaned happily. "Oh... *Moony*."

Sirius made a face and quietly asked, "She calls him Moony?"

Harry held up a hand, urging Sirius to stay quiet.

"Oh Bellatrix," Remus moaned her name out.

"Umm..." Bellatrix stopped. "Never mind."

"What?" Remus asked worriedly. "What is it?"

"It's nothing," Bellatrix assured him. "Keep going."

"Is it the baby?"

"No, no," Bellatrix answered immediately. "It's just..."

"What?" Remus asked, clearly awaiting an answer.

"It's... well..." Bellatrix sighed. "You're pronouncing my name wrong."

Sirius looked at Harry who held up a finger to shush him.

"I'm pronouncing it wrong?" Remus asked weakly. "But I've always pronounced it Bellatrix."

"It's alright," Bellatrix assured him. "I don't really mind that much."

Remus was perturbed. "Well then how do you pronounce it?"

Harry turned to glance at Sirius while Bellatrix's voice got all husky and sexy. "It's pronounced... Billy-trucks."

"What?"

“Billy,” Bellatrix heaved out the name as she slapped Remus on the ass. “Trucks.”

“Billy-trucks?” Remus repeated in disbelief. “Since when?”

“It’s always been pronounced Billy-trucks,” Bellatrix assured him.

“Always been...” Remus stopped and put two and two together. “Harry!” he shouted at the top of his lungs.

Harry and Sirius winced at the loud shout.

“Silencing charm?” Bellatrix reminded just as Harry turned around and canceled the spell on her door.

Remus came bursting out of her room, wrapped in only a sheet. “Harry!”

Harry was shushing Sirius who was biting his tongue, trying not to laugh.

“What’s up Moony?” Harry asked innocently. “Billy-trucks not giving you any trouble, I hope.”

“Harry!” Remus scolded. “She trusted you.”

“Well that wasn’t very smart,” Sirius mumbled.

“Billy-trucks,” Harry greeted looking over Remus shoulder. “You know what this is about?”

Bellatrix stood there completely naked. “No idea.”

“This is about,” Remus started before noticing Bellatrix was naked and Sirius was staring. “Put something on!”

“You know you’re a Black, Billy-trucks,” Harry said. “You don’t have to take orders like that from anyone.”

“Stop calling her that,” Remus snapped. “Her name is Bellatrix.”

"I think I know my own name," Bellatrix said with a frown, putting her hands on her hips.

"I think you need to put some clothes on."

"I think it's impressive Remus still has an erection."

"I think..." Harry paused and turned back to Sirius. "Really? The erection is what you're thinking about?"

Bellatrix raised her hand. "It's what I'm thinking about."

Sirius nodded with a smile. "Okay now I'm thinking about Billy-trucks again."

"Stop thinking about her," Remus squeaked turning around and trying to block Bellatrix from view. "Your name is Bellatrix. Harry obliviated you and is playing a cruel joke."

"Are you sure?" Bellatrix asked skeptically.

"Yes, I'm sure," Remus insisted.

Bellatrix tilted her head curiously. "You don't think maybe I'm pranking you, trying to get them to like me better?"

"No, I-" Remus stopped at the smile on her face and saw Harry and Sirius were grinning brightly. "Oh... oh, you're good."

"And naked too," Sirius cheered with a big thumbs up. "Fantastic."

Remus could tell he'd been had and found himself smiling as much as everyone else.

Bellatrix looked down to where Remus was holding the sheet up. She put a hand on his chest and softly raked her nails down. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I am," Sirius answered confidently.

"I do believe so," Remus opened up his sheet and pulled Bellatrix's naked body up next to his so that they could both be wrapped up.

Harry watched them wiggle back towards Bellatrix's room. He picked up the remote and saw Sirius was still grinning. "Old naked horny people can be pretty cute."

"Yeah," Sirius admitted before his face contorted. "Wait no. We're supposed to hate her."

"We like Moony," Harry offered. "And we like naked."

Sirius seemed to accept that rationalization. "I guess that makes it okay."

Albus had been sitting in his office, pondering the mystery of the Lords Black. The Dark Lord Voldemort had been tentative in his actions for several months. But ever since the Dark Lord's very public defeat at their hands, he'd essentially disappeared completely. Without the need for reactions to the Dark Lord's actions, Albus had a lot more time to spend musing on the enigmatic young Heads to the Black family.

Albus had been unable to locate any information on their past at all. He was nearly certain they weren't from anywhere in the United Kingdom, but he had yet to find any indication on where they came from. Even their accents seemed genuine, though Albus knew that could be accomplished through magic. No accredited schools of magic reported any former students matching either of their descriptions.

It was almost as if they didn't exist until a couple months ago.

Their behavior and interaction with others, in particular the Lupins and Potters, was intriguing, but both of those families had recent history with the Blacks.

Albus felt there was something he was missing but he couldn't quite put it all together. His silent musings were interrupted by a whistle and burst of smoke from one of the many objects cluttering his desk.

He immediately leapt to his feet and headed out towards the Forbidden Forest to see what this particular informant had to say.

Albus masked his presence as he walked. He knew very well that this man was Alan Weston, despite Weston's attempts to hide his identity. But if a disloyal Death Eater felt more comfortable behind a supposed veil of secrecy, Albus wasn't going to shatter his delusions of privacy.

"Good evening," Albus greeted appearing in a quiet moonlit clearing.

"Listen," Alan Weston softly said as he looked both ways. "I don't have long."

Albus' eyes unfocused while turning his head from left to right. "You haven't been followed."

"Neither have you," Alan retorted, acting insulted that the Headmaster still treated him like an amateur.

Albus smiled and inclined his head. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm guessing you heard," Alan explained. "The meeting with the bloodsuckers went as expected."

Albus nodded. "I had heard, but it's nice to see you've returned in good health."

"The Dark Lord's attention hasn't been on the Ministry, your Order, or even the man in black," Alan said.

"No?"

Alan shook his head. "He's been getting all the texts and information he can on researching parallel dimensions."

Albus' eyebrows rose at not having heard this yet. He just nodded, urging Alan to continue.

"From what I've seen, he's been singularly focused on them: recent theories, ancient scrolls, how or where they exist, everything," Alan explained. "I don't know if he's recruiting help or planning to take a trip. But I thought you should know."

Albus nodded, processing the information. "I am glad you told me."

"I should go," Alan said, looking over his shoulders into the darkness. "You know how to contact me if you need to."

"Indeed I do," Albus replied, trying to think of why the Dark Lord was researching parallel dimensions with such determination. "Take care of yourself."

Alan pulled his cloak tighter and took off on a brisk walk into the darkness.

Albus turned and began to slowly walk back towards the castle. He knew the Dark Lord wouldn't be so single-minded on merely gaining a new advantage. Voldemort was too cautious for that. Albus knew if the Dark Lord was as focused as Alan claimed then it was because the Dark Lord feared something.

He couldn't understand why the Dark Lord would fear a parallel dimension.

Albus gasped loudly and stopped where he was. Suddenly everything started to make sense, including the mystery of the Lord Blacks. The Dark Lord didn't fear a parallel dimension. He feared a *traveler* from a parallel dimension. Especially one so powerful that he could stand up to the Dark Lord.

Albus smiled at the idea that Sirius and Harry Black really did just appear mere months ago, most likely both travelers from another dimension.

Albus had just started walking again when he paused in surprise once more. It finally dawned on the Headmaster, that the Dark Lord did not fear dimension traveler Lord Harry Black.

The Dark Lord feared a full grown Harry Potter, godson of Sirius Black, and viable subject for the prophecy of the Dark Lord's downfall.

Albus had a skip in his step and a smile on his face as he hurried back to his office, wondering how best to utilize this new information.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Harry's bad mood was plain to see as he childishly stomped into the kitchen.

Sirius looked up from the Daily Prophet and smiled at Harry. "No luck?"

Harry grunted negatively.

"Maybe I can help," Sirius offered.

"I don't need to be laughed at," Harry grumbled. "And it's not like you could keep an eye out for me."

"True," Sirius agreed. "But between the two of us, I'm the only one who's successfully mastered the animagus transformation."

Harry frowned, unable to disagree with that. "Alright then, have you got any ideas on how to make this work? Because nothing I've tried has worked."

Sirius folded up the paper, relishing the opportunity to be a proper godfather. "So what have you been trying?"

"Now that I know my form, I've been trying to self-transfigure my fingers and hands first."

Sirius frowned. "And how's that working out for you?"

Harry shrugged. "One time my fingers got really blurry, but I was already dizzy and hit my head earlier, so that might have been nothing."

"Yeah," Sirius slowly drew out the word. "I think you're going about this all wrong."

"I assume you have a suggestion," Harry added. "Or else that was awful advice."

"I do," Sirius said. "You're still thinking of the exercises and steps necessary for normal animagi. Most people have to think about things

like structural and physical differences that need to be treated with caution. That's why you're supposed to magically determine how to bridge the gaps between your two different outer shells."

"Outer shells?" Harry said doubtfully.

"Yes, outer shells," Sirius repeated. "You are Harry and only Harry. Harry was born a wizard, and has had the outer shell of a wizard for all of his life. He now also has the option of another outer shell."

"Did you actually study this stuff or just take some really good drugs you found in a desert?"

"Do we need to do a show of hands again to remind people which of us can do this?" Sirius retorted with a condescending look. "As I was saying, *outer shells*. This is important. You have to stop thinking of yourself as a wizard first. You are Harry first, and a wizard second. Just like I am Sirius first, and a wizard second. And occasionally, I'm Sirius first, and a bad dog second. Always thinking of your own identity first is how you exert control over your different shell's instincts." Sirius rubbed his chin in thought. "Not really sure what a ghost's instincts would be. Maybe being generally depressing and having a slightly superior attitude?"

"That's not how ghosts are," Harry argued, feeling oddly defensive.

"Anyways," Sirius continued. "For most people, it's the small amount of success they get from seeing their hand turn into a paw or whatever that opens their mind to the possibility. To really grasp the idea that you are as much a dog or a ghost as you are a wizard. And there's like a mental switch that is flipped. You know not only is it possible, but it's real and it's *you*. Once you hit that it just takes months and months of practice to fully transform your whole body."

"You think I'm going to need months and months of practice?"

"No," Sirius assured him. "I don't. I don't think you're going need hardly any practice at all. I think once you flip that switch, you'll transform instantly. I don't think there will be any gradual change from corporeal and alive to incorporeal and 'not exactly alive.' But I do

think,” Sirius grinned brightly. “I do think figuring out how to flip that switch and then control it is going to be a lot harder for you.”

“Great,” Harry sighed. “I’d kinda guessed that much on my own. My question is *how?*”

“Will it,” Sirius firmly replied.

“Will it?”

“Yup,” Sirius said. “There’s no secret incantation, no special place inside you, no spirit animal or totem to guide you. You simply will it.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do for the past week,” Harry insisted. “It’s why I keep getting headaches and crapping bloody diamonds. I spend so much damn time just concentrating as hard as I can on *willing it* that my crap has turned into granite.”

Sirius chuckled in commiseration. “I tried sniffing James and Peter’s bums just to get in the right frame of doggie mind.”

“Did that help?”

“Not so much, no.”

Harry closed his eyes. “Thank you for telling me a pointless story that put the image of you sniffing Wormtail and my Dad’s butts permanently into my head.”

“You’re very welcome,” Sirius replied happily. “And you know, your body reacted instinctively once already. We could try and... *force* the issue again.”

“You want to try to kill me.”

“If it’ll help,” Sirius said flashing a grin.

“It won’t,” Harry grumbled. “Unless you actually were to put my life in genuine danger, I’d know it’s a fake. And I’m not ready to risk dying just to try and control my form.”

“Are you sure?”

Harry nodded. "Alive is still better than dead. And alive but grievously injured, I'd like to avoid for as long as possible."

"That's just it," Sirius said. "For your ghost side, alive *shouldn't* be better than dead."

"I'm not willing to get a death wish," Harry argued.

"Hey," Sirius pondered aloud. "What if, when you were a baby, you got killed and turned into a ghost-"

Harry closed his eyes. "Stop."

Sirius ignored the interruption. "But you had enough magic and transformed yourself back into a living baby-"

"Stop please."

"And so now you're more like a ghost, with a wizard alternate form. And have been unknowingly living in your secondary form for decades," Sirius added with a grin. "Like Wormtail did."

"Just stop."

"It makes so much sense," Sirius nodded, thinking back to what he knew of Harry. "I mean hundreds of mothers would have sacrificed themselves out of love for their own children. Why would Lily be able to-"

"Sirius!" Harry snapped. "Stop. I'm not dead. I'm alive. Boy-Who-Lived? Dumb name. *But accurate.*"

"Hmm."

"Besides, I didn't die. The spell rebounded off me and hit him."

"Oh yeah," Sirius realized. "It couldn't have hit you normally. So what kind of shield did Lily-"

"A blood ritual of binding," Harry explained. "It was probably done when we first went into hiding. Because when Voldemort killed her, it

sealed the binding on me. If anyone else had killed her, that's who the binding would have protected me from."

"A blood ritual?" Sirius repeated. "But she was your mother. You're already as blood connected as you can be."

"That part neither I nor Hermione could figure out," Harry admitted with a shrug. "But I'm not dead."

"Hmm, I'm thinking," Sirius mused. "Do me a favor, close your eyes."

Harry looked at him dubiously.

"Just trust me," Sirius begged in irritation.

"Alright," Harry agreed, squinting his eyes shut. "What am I doing?"

A giant deafening boom sounded just behind Harry's right ear.

Harry slapped a hand over his severely stressed ear. "What the hell?"

"Damn," Sirius said with frown.

"I can't hear you," Harry shouted back at Sirius while gently putting pressuring on his ear.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "I said-"

Another massive explosion of sound erupted this time, right next to Sirius, sending the older man sprawling to the floor in the other direction.

"Not so funny now, is it?" Harry shouted at Sirius.

"I can't hear you!" Sirius exclaimed back, rubbing his ear, wondering if he should be worried at the small amount of blood trickling out his ear. "Truce?"

"What," Harry screamed back, rubbing his ear as well.

"What?" Sirius asked cleaning out his good ear.

"I can't hear you," Harry responded.

"What did you say?"

"I said I can't hear you!"

"What?"

"This is stupid."

Sirius frowned. "Don't call me kid. I was trying to help you."

Harry looked at Sirius in surprise. "Drying the elf puke?"

"Just stop trying to understand me. You have no idea what I'm saying."

"I give up," Harry said shrugging in resignation. "I'm done trying to understand you. I have no idea what you just said."

Sirius sighed, shaking his head at Harry. "I hate you."

Harry looked at Sirius curiously, wiggling his pinkie in his ear. "What kind of soup?"

"Cream of cock and balls," Sirius replied moving his lips excessively, mocking Harry's inability to hear clearly.

"Is that French? Coq aux bailles?"

Sirius looked at Harry doubtfully.

"I'm not a huge fan of creamy ones. But if you get a big chunk of meat in my mouth, I'll take a cream."

Sirius's eyes widened and jaw dropped at double meaning.

Harry slammed an invisible arm right into Sirius' throat, sending the man into a coughing fit. "You really think I wouldn't recognize the words 'cock and balls?' Have some faith in me, Sirius."

"Dammit," Sirius croaked out while rubbing his throat. A raspy tinged voice snapped, "That really hurts."

"Maybe you should've thought of that when you were deafening me," Harry retorted.

"I was trying to scare you," Sirius explained. "You know, maybe frighten you half to death?"

"You're an idiot."

"Yeah but if it had worked, I would've been a genius."

"I don't think I want to know the kind of world where you count as a genius."

"Laugh it up."

"That wouldn't be a world where up is down. That'd be a world where up is... jello."

"Look buddy. Last time you were thinking about becoming an animagi, you were fearful for your life, and possibly your life really was in danger. Scaring the bloody form out of you..." Sirius trailed off in thought. He snapped back to reality, "Jello on the ceilings *is* a damn good idea. I'm going to talk to Moony about making a charm or a wheeze."

Harry looked at his godfather in consternation. "Wow, Sirius, thanks for all the help. I'm really glad we had this talk."

Sirius either completely missed or ignored the sarcasm. "You're very welcome." Having accomplished his mission, he turned and walked right out of the room.

Harry leaned back in his chair and pulled out an animagi text that he'd read several times before. He glanced at the door briefly considering the idea of scaring the form out of him. He was on high alert expecting Sirius to attempt to frighten him again.

Harry re-read the passage and set the text down. He took a deep breath and made the decision to try again. He stood up in the middle of the room, and went through his exercises. He was blocking out as much outside noise as possible, focusing on how different it had felt to be a ghost. The stillness of everything, the enveloping silence, the foreign sensation of solid matter.

His brow was covered in sweat as he continued concentrating solely on the animagus transformation. He was so single-minded he didn't even hear her the first time.

"What're you doing?" Ginny repeated louder, sticking her head over Harry's right shoulder.

Harry's heart just about stopped at the sound of her voice. He spun around defensively and instinctively started to bullshit. "Listen, I can explain-" Harry's explanation came to a sudden halt when his arm swung around and connected solidly with a slap across Ginny's cheek.

Harry whimpered in surprise but looked down and saw he was still solid. He hadn't transformed, as he had feared. He then considered the fact that he just slapped a ghost and wondered the odds Ginny might not have noticed. "On second thought, now might not be the best time for explanations."

Ginny rubbed her cheek in glorious amazement. She crept forward faster than Harry could backpedal and stuck her hand straight through his heart. When her fingers met no resistance, Ginny frowned and pouted, "Aww... I thought we were finally permitted to touch each other."

"Oh thank Merlin." Harry whispered a quiet prayer. He looked down at his hands and reached out, horrified to discover he'd just poked Ginny in the tit.

Ginny gasped at the sensation. She looked at Harry's hand in awe.

"That's not right," Harry announced looking at his hand angrily. "You're a ghost. I shouldn't be able to-" Harry stopped in surprise as his hands met no resistance at all. He walked through Ginny's

incorporeal body. He poked a finger through her shoulder and felt nothing. Immediately after pulling his finger back he poked again this time touching solid shoulder, eliciting a gasp from the young ghost.

"You know what this means?" Ginny sang merrily as she spun in a circle.

"I could guess."

"It means I still can't hold you, but you can hold me."

"I guessed wrong."

Ginny hopped up in front of him with her arms wide open. "Hold me, Harry."

Harry tucked his hands under his armpits. "No thanks."

"Harry," Ginny whined.

"Maybe some other time," Harry evasively offered.

"When," Ginny demanded.

"Never?"

Ginny didn't care for that suggestion and sought middle ground. "Umm... maybe some other time?"

Harry smiled. "That's just what I was thinking."

Ginny moved over to perch on the side of the chair nearest to Harry. "I'm here, you know. Just in case, you want to touch me. I'm cool with it."

"I'll keep that in mind," Harry said.

"So," Ginny conversationally began. "I don't suppose that bull-dyke man-hating bartender version of me got kissed by a dementor anytime recently?"

Harry looked at Ginny a little worriedly.

“Because I mean, if there’s just a perfectly good spare Ginny Weasley body around, I’ve got dibs.”

“No,” Harry answered her earnestly. “No dementor kisses. I just saw her a couple nights back.”

“Chin up, Harry,” Ginny said trying to hold Harry’s hand. She smiled softly. “There’s still time.”

Harry wondered if he was going to develop ghost-like characteristics such as dementia or wishing death on others. “Hey Ginny, what’s it like being a ghost?”

“Harry, I’m soul-bonded to *you*,” Ginny assured him. “I’m only a ghost for now. I’m waiting for you to get this madness out of your system before we spend the rest of eternity together.”

“So a lot of lying to yourself and constantly avoiding the glaringly obvious issue,” Harry replied. “Not bad. Not bad at all.”

“There’s a healthy amount of spying on naked people too,” Ginny corrected.

“That’s always fun,” Harry agreed, liking the prospects of ghost-hood more and more.

“Why do you ask?” Ginny inquired. “And were you doing animagus exercises when I walked in?”

The color drained from Harry’s face as he tried and failed to mask his emotions. “No,” he squeaked.

“No?”

“What is this? The Spanish Inquisition?” Harry snapped as he got up and stomped away.

Ginny gasped joyously. “You know your form, don’t you?” She saw the look on Harry’s face. “You do! That’s great. So what is it?”

“It’s umm...” Harry stalled. “Umm...”

“What?” Ginny scoffed. “Oh come on. It’s not like your form is a ghost.”

Harry stumbled back and his body let out a poof of displaced air at her dishearteningly accurate guess. He looked down at his arms and hands and saw straight through the translucent light of his ghostly form all the way to the floor. He looked back up at Ginny and saw the female ghost had been shocked into a stupor.

Without another word, the ghostly form of Harry turned tail and ran out of the room and down the hall.

“Harry!” Ginny called out chasing after him, floating straight through the walls. She quickly caught back up to him. “Harry, wait!”

Harry could feel Ginny gaining on him and took a quick right, heading down the stairs.

Ginny just floated straight down, while Harry ran the long way down the curving staircase. He hit the bottom stair running and dove headfirst in a somersault, successfully avoiding Ginny. He glanced over his shoulder at her and ran headfirst into the book shelf.

Harry passed incorporeally through and continued running down the left side of the hall.

Ginny was floating behind him, at a less frantic pace.

Not finding what he was looking for, Harry crossed the hall and began running through the rooms on the other side.

Harry skidded to a stop when he found Sirius and Remus, working together. So far they had the ceiling half-coated with a gooey layer of lime green jello.

“Hey,” Harry began pointing at the ceiling curiously.

“Hey,” Sirius happily shouted back noticing Harry had transformed again.

"You two gotta do the reversal spell," Harry ordered quickly remembering why he'd been looking for them.

"Hello Harry," Remus mockingly greeted. "I'm fine. Thanks for asking. It's good to see you too."

"Listen, I don't have a lot of ti-" Harry cut off, yelping out a feminine shriek at the sight of Ginny floating through the wall. Harry ran straight through Remus and across the hall again.

Harry was sprinting through the rooms, staying one step ahead of Ginny the whole way. The next pass through the temporary jello room, Harry had enough time to yell, "The Spell!" He doubled-back seconds later. "Do it!"

"Alright, alright," Remus said aiming his wand at Harry. He paused and turned to Sirius, "What was the incantation, again?"

Harry turned and ran straight through Remus again, grumbling, "Oh you're hilarious."

Remus shuddered as Harry passed through him and into the next room. "No magical arms as a ghost?"

Sirius twitched having felt a chill rake through his brain. "They're ghostly too."

"He went that-a-way," Remus told Ginny's ghost while pointing over his shoulder.

"Do you know what...?" Ginny questioned.

"Ghost animagus," Sirius answered.

Ginny nodded as if she knew it all along. "I always wondered why I was taken from Harry at such a young age."

"You don't think the Killing Curse answered most of that question," Sirius inquired.

Ginny harrumphed. "It makes sense that it was necessary for me to learn and understand how we'd spend eternity together so that I would be able to help him master his form." Ginny smiled, clasping her hands together. "My Harry *needs* me."

"Did she-" Harry cut off with a yelp and disappeared right back in the wall he'd stuck his head through.

"Don't fight fate, Harry!" Ginny called out hurrying after him, floating out of the room. "She's kind of a bitch."

Sirius glanced over to see how Remus was doing.

"Ginny's going to molest him, isn't she?" Remus fearfully asked.

Sirius nodded. "Probably. But if anything can inspire Harry into figuring out how to transform back, it'll be Ginny and her bad touches."

"We'll get him next time he passes through here," Remus said. "But no slacking during your conjuring turn. Get back to jello blasting."

Harry was beginning to think he'd lost her finally. He glanced over his shoulder as he crept through the library wall.

"Hello love," Ginny greeted with wide open arms from just inside the library wall.

Harry whipped his hand around and tried to stop himself from crashing into Ginny. He tripped forward with a shriek, flailing his arms wildly.

Ginny reached out to grab onto Harry and grasped only air.

"Ahh!" Harry screamed, flapped his hands, and assumed a defensive position.

"Aww," Ginny pouted heartbroken.

Harry's frantic hand motions slowed down and he cracked open an eye. "Ahh?"

“Why can’t we touch?” Ginny frowned. “I can touch other ghosts.”

“Hey,” Harry realized pushing his incorporeal arms through Ginny’s incorporeal arms. “I can’t touch you. Not even when I’m trying.”

Ginny looked up to the heavens. “It’s because I called you a bitch, isn’t it?”

“Why can’t I touch you?” Harry wondered.

“Maybe part of my helping you master your form will include figuring this out,” Ginny mused.

“Huh?”

She turned to Harry. “It’s not like you can instantly know exactly what it means to be a ghost.”

Harry frowned. “There’s more to it?”

“Of course, Harry,” Ginny huffed exasperatedly. “That’s why I had to die. So that I’d know all about being a ghost and could teach my soul mate.”

“You think he’d mind if you help me too?” Harry asked.

Ginny shook her head. “You’re such a kidder.”

Harry started to feel a little guilty. “You’re really going to help me even though I’m kind of a dick to you?”

“Of course,” Ginny assured him. “This is undoubtedly another way for us to be together for eternity.”

“Oh... joy,” Harry forced out the words.

Ginny grinned brightly, forgetting her earlier disappointment. “We should start by getting you familiar with how it feels being a ghost.”

Harry held up a hand to stop her. “Hang on. Let me go tell Sirius and Remus not to disturb us. We’ll use the room I was practicing in.”

Ginny floated along next to Harry while he walked through the walls until he reached the jello dripping room.

"Hey guys," Harry said attracting their attention. "I was-"

Sirius and Remus both called out the spell forcing Harry from his animagus transformed state. They were exhausting themselves but quickly they funneled enough magic to complete the change.

Harry popped back into his corporeal breathing form and stood there staring at them in shock.

Remus saw Ginny right behind Harry and knew they'd just been in time. It took a lot out of him, but it was worth it for the look on Harry's face. "You are welcome."

Harry's abject horror began to wear off and he found his voice. "You motherfuckers."

Ginny gasped happily. "Well, well, well. Look who can touch me again."

Sirius and Remus glanced at each other and didn't see all of the appreciation they expected from Harry.

"You complete, utter bastards."

"Perhaps now," Ginny whispered in Harry's ear, "we can talk about my payment for training you in the ways of the ghost."

Harry growled at Remus and Sirius. "You motherfuckers."

Sirius was catching on. "You changed your mind on that reversal spell thing, didn't you?"

"Figured that one out, did you?" Harry dangerously announced. "And before you ask, no, I have no clue when I'll be able to manage the transformation again."

Remus meekly defended. "You're the one who was begging for the spell."

"Can't you try and recreate whatever changed you this time?" Sirius asked.

Harry glanced at Ginny and shook his head. "I highly doubt it. The reason I feared transforming was what Roaming Hands Weasley here was going to do to me if I did. Now I know she can't touch me when I do. Not quite so scary."

Ginny was biting her cheek, deep in thought. "Have you tried triggering it with intercourse with a ghost?"

Sirius shrugged. "It's not a bad id-"

"It's a very bad idea!" Harry snapped out.

Remus snickered to himself.

"What?" Harry barked at him.

"Sorry," Remus apologized. "The whole ghost intercourse thing just reminded me of something."

Harry, Sirius, and Ginny were all staring at Remus unsure if they wanted to know what was on his mind.

Sirius couldn't contain his curiosity and asked, "What?"

Remus was still amused. "In your world, did you ever go as Sir Nicholas for Halloween?"

"Yeah," Sirius recalled. "I just covered the front of my pants in blood."

"*Nearly headless?*" Remus mocked in a high-pitched voice. "*How can you be nearly headless?*"

"Oh good god," Harry whispered in fright.

Sirius felt inordinately proud. "I made five Hufflepuffs cry."

"And two more had to get explanations from their prefects," Remus added.

Harry turned away from Sirius and Remus to leave the room. "It's going to be one of those days, I can tell."

Ginny floated dutifully along with him. "You know what might make you feel better, Harry?"

"What?"

"Getting to third base."

"No."

"Second base?"

"Stop."

"Did you write this?" Bellatrix exclaimed, rushing up to Remus with tears in her eyes.

"Write what?" Remus asked curiously, noticing she was clutching a letter close to her heart.

"What am I saying? Of course, you wrote this," Bellatrix continued, her mood changing from 'so happy she could cry' to 'self-deprecating' in the blink of an eye. "It's in your handwriting."

"It is?" Remus asked curiously.

Bellatrix's smile twisted into a frown. "Unless you've been writing love letters to some other woman named Bellatrix..."

"No!" Remus insisted, picking up on the warning signs that Bellatrix's mood was more volatile than usual.

"Some other *man* named Bellatrix?" Sirius asked, sticking his head in.

"No," Remus sputtered. "I haven't been writing anyone any love letters."

Bellatrix whimpered and was fighting back tears.

“Except that one,” Remus said pointing towards the letter Bellatrix was guarding like precious treasure.

Bellatrix’s sniffles twisted into a smile of pure bliss. “Oh Remus!” She lunged forward wrapping her arms around him. “This is the sweetest thing anyone’s ever done for me.”

Remus rubbed gentle circles into her back trying to calm her down. “Well... I’m... I’m glad you liked it.”

Sirius and Harry were looking at each other worriedly.

“The sweetest thing?” Harry mouthed at Sirius.

“I know!” Sirius mouthed back.

“That’s just sad,” Harry softly concluded.

“I’m...” Bellatrix was still crying happily. “I’m not the kind of girl who gets too many love letters and... I just...” She gripped the letter tighter. “I’ll treasure this forever.”

“That’s,” Remus paused looking at Sirius and Harry helplessly. “That’s why I wrote it?”

Bellatrix finally pulled back to look at Remus. “I think I’m going to lay down for a nap. Come tuck me in?”

“I will,” Remus assured her. “I just need to talk to these two for a minute.”

Bellatrix nodded in understanding. “Don’t be long.”

Remus stuck a hand out cautiously. “Do you mind if I re-read my letter?”

Bellatrix glanced between the letter in her hand and Remus. “I want it back.”

“I’ll bring it up with me when I tuck you in,” Remus promised her.

Bellatrix handed the letter to him confidently. “You’re so sweet.”

Remus made a non-committal sound while keeping a smile on his face.

The three men watched Bellatrix leave the room. Remus spun around angrily. "Alright. What did you do?"

"What makes you think we did anything?" Sirius asked.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "I'm not sure she even got the right letter."

Remus reluctantly unfolded the letter and saw a few verses of poetry had been scribbled in what appeared to be his handwriting.

"I never heard the final draft," Sirius pointed out. "So, speak up."

Remus pretended not to hear Sirius, but obliged with the request. He worriedly read from the parchment. "*Bellatrix, oh Bellatrix, how I tire of your gay tricks.*"

"Snappy," Sirius critiqued.

"*I doubt we could get rid o' ya,*" Remus continued in confusion, "*with just a case of Chlamydia.*"

"Catchy," Sirius said a little too proud of his pun. "Oww," he swore grabbing his eye. "Why you gotta go there, Harry?"

Remus ignored them both and kept reading. "*But I was thinkin' maybe ya, might trim down your labia.*"

Sirius snickered holding on to Harry for support.

"This is disgusting," Remus complained.

"Keep reading, keep reading," Sirius urged.

"*Mud flaps belong on silly trucks,*" Remus read aloud shamefully. "*Not on my sick and twisted little Billy-trucks.*"

Harry and Sirius were both laughing to see the way it pained Remus to say that name aloud.

"That's it. I'm done," Remus said, not wanting to read any further.

"No!" Sirius begged. "Come on! There's at least two more verses."

Remus sighed but gave in to temptation. He looked down at the start of the next verse. "*It would take almost two Great Walls of China,*" He flipped over the first page and continued, "*to actually plug your gaping va-* Who wrote this?"

"My lips are sealed." Harry refused to answer.

Sirius wasn't quite so trustworthy. "I think that line was the work of your daughter."

"Tonks?" Remus asked in disbelief.

"No," Harry sarcastically replied. "The barely formed fetus in the ex-Death Eater's womb is a fan of limericks and contributed most of the second verse."

Remus just looked at Harry and Sirius, thinking he needed to have a long talk with Tonks.

"Remus!" Bellatrix yelled out in despair from the floor above. "Come fuck me!"

Harry and Sirius exchanged a surprised look while Remus failed to hide his blush.

"I mean tuck me in," Bellatrix loudly corrected, belatedly processing what she'd said.

Remus smiled weakly. "I should go."

"I didn't really mean tuck me in," Bellatrix earnestly admitted at the top of her lungs.

"Yeah, you should," Harry agreed. "But Moony? When you're, *ahem*, tucking her in, do me a favor and think of Sirius' arse."

Remus winced.

"Here ya go, big guy," Sirius happily followed Harry's lead, turning around and flashing a pale cheek at the other Marauder.

"Oh god," Remus said guarding his eyes in disgust. He scraped his tongue on the roof of his mouth trying to get the taste out. He flashed a winning smile. "Thanks."

Sirius watched Remus walk happily away and skip up the steps towards Bellatrix's room. He turned towards his godson. "Why did he thank me? Harry, why did he thank me?"

Harry opened his mouth and closed it helplessly. "Don't know. Don't care. It's just one of those days."

Sirius looked at Harry warily. "And just what happens on one of *those* days?"

"Usually?"

"Yeah."

"Too much."

"Too much happens?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah," Sirius repeated with a slow nod. "We still doing that thing this afternoon?"

Harry considered the question and shrugged indifferently. "Yeah."

Sirius could hear the tiredness in Harry's tone. "Are you getting all pensive and introspective on me?"

Harry realized he had been deep in thought. "Maybe."

"Did a vagina come with that attitude because you're acting like a girl."

"I've just been thinking about how things are different here because I wasn't in this world," Harry explained. "People who are happier, or for that matter alive, because they never knew me."

Sirius wasn't in the mood for a pity party. "Like say, Voldemort, for instance?"

"True enough," Harry admitted, catching the hint. "Let me just relax for a bit and then we'll go do the thing."

"You want to watch something on the muggical box?" Sirius suggested.

Harry lead the way up to their muggle entertainment room, grumbling. "You know saying it more often isn't going to make it a word. You just sound stupid, again."

"Words are for conformists, you vaptastic fantomiter," Sirius pouted.

Harry paused and glanced at Sirius. "Did you just now make that up?"

"You connest your baltfooling dushbunnets," Sirius replied with a knowing smile.

Harry turned away from Sirius and walked the rest of the way into the room. "Don't talk that way anymore. It makes me want to hurt you."

Sirius remembered how much his ability to make up real sounding nonsense words instinctively both scared and disturbed James as well. "Where's the TV remote?"

Harry pointed to the coffee table. "It's right in front of you."

"No," Sirius corrected. "That's the remote for the DVD."

"So watch a DVD."

"I still need the TV remote."

"Is it the skinny white one?"

"No, that's the receiver."

“What’s the one in your hand?”

“This is for the cable box.”

“Good lord,” Harry grumbled turning towards the couch he was on. He sent out several invisible, magical arms and quickly searched through the cushions. He found some change, a pen, what looked like a finger, and a comb. He strengthened the arms and checked the cushions on the other couch. “Ah-ha!”

A remote came floating out from nestled down in the left side. “I am the king,” Harry pronounced pushing the remote to Sirius.

Sirius sighed. “That’s the laser disc remote.”

“We have a laser disc?” Harry asked. “And what is a laser disc?”

“I have no idea. And I don’t think we do, but our neighbors do,” Sirius explained. “Last week I slipped on an invisibility cloak and borrowed that remote from the neighbors because I needed the batteries... *for the TV remote.*”

“This is ridiculous,” Harry snapped. He drew his wand and confidently cast, “*Accio remote!*”

The nearest remote jumped up towards Harry before popping loudly in a small burst of flames and sparks. All the other remotes followed shortly after zooming to Harry and then exploding, catching fire, or vibrating with smoke billowing out the top.

“Oops,” Harry apologized forgetting that while his magical arms worked normally in the warded muggle room, magic did not.

Sirius looked down at the remains of the remotes from the cable box, the DVD, the neighbor’s laser disc player, and the receiver. “Still no TV remote!”

They both looked up as Remus’ pants came flying into the room stopping in front of Harry. The pants began to smoke, before they started shaking and erupted in flames.

Harry smiled weakly at Sirius. "Looks like Moony stole the TV remote and stuck it to his pocket for nefarious purposes."

Sirius glanced at all their melted and broken pieces of remotes and the smoldering remains of Remus' pants. He looked up at Harry, clearly not amused. "Guess you really showed him, huh?"

"I said 'oops,'" Harry defended. "Besides, we had too many remotes."

"I think we have too *few* now," Sirius commented.

"They sell these spiffy new super-smart remotes that can replace other remotes," Harry explained. "I remember seeing a mention of them on sale somewhere." Harry got up and walked over to the door. "I should have a muggle paper from last week still in my room."

"Hang on." Sirius stopped Harry from leaving. "I got today's right here."

"You've got today's?"

Sirius nodded. "Chicks dig a roguishly handsome man, especially one with the Financial Times tucked under his arm."

"That's..." Harry smiled as he took the newspaper from Sirius, "not a half bad idea."

Harry felt wetness on his hand and looked down to find the Financial Times was a slobbery mess.

Sirius grinned. "And on occasion, I'll get some hotties to play fetch with Padfoot, allowing me ample opportunity to sniff their crotches."

"Nice," Harry said with a forced smile. He wiped his hand off and slowly unfurled the newspaper. The large front page headline caught his eye.

Harry blinked and had to re-read it several times. "This can't be happening."

"What?" Sirius asked. "What is it?"

Harry turned the paper around displaying the front page. He read the headline aloud, "*Piers Polkiss Cures Cancer.*"

Sirius frowned at Harry. "Isn't that a good thing?"

"I... guess," Harry answered helplessly.

Sirius scratched his head in confusion. "Do you know him?"

"Yeah," Harry unfortunately admitted.

"Ahh," Sirius said finally catching on. "This is because it's one of *those* days. And you were just talking about the differences in... oh dear. Was he one of the people you tried to save but couldn't?"

"No," Harry replied. "He's just a dick."

Sirius was not expecting that answer.

"And he's stupid."

"Stupid?" Sirius questioned. "It sounds like he's smart enough to cure cancer."

"There's no way," Harry argued. "Not the Piers Polkiss I knew."

"What's the article say?" Sirius suggested. "Maybe it's a different guy."

"I'm sure," Harry sarcastically retorted. "Because Piers Polkiss is such a common name."

"Could be."

Harry knew better than to grasp at that hope. He read the start of the front page. "Reverend Dr. Polkiss... *what?*"

"Huh?"

"Reverend Dr. Polkiss, last years' recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize-" Harry stopped and handed the paper to Sirius. "I can't do it. I don't want to read this."

Sirius took the paper and quickly scanned through the article. "Wow... this guy's a regular hero."

"He's no hero," Harry whined. "He's an evil, cruel person. He was the original mastermind behind the games of *Harry-hunting* and *Tie-Harry-to-the-back-of-the-bus*."

Sirius smirked. "Exactly how does one play *Tie-Harry-to-the-back-of-the-bus*?"

"It's kinda like *Punch-Sirius-in-the-crotch* if you were seven and a bleeder," Harry snapped.

Sirius winced and decided to avoid that road. "I guess without your aggravating presence in his life, he had a lot more free time."

Harry tried to ignore Sirius but couldn't contain his curiosity. He gave in and asked, "What did he win a Nobel Peace Prize for?"

"It says it in here somewhere." Sirius scanned backwards through the article looking for the passage. "Here it is! Blah, blah, blah... negotiated a truce between Israel and Palestine."

"No Harry," Harry grumbled. "And instead you get cancer cured and peace in the Middle East. That's real funny."

"I'd call it moderately funny," Sirius said wiggling his hand. "But you're not crying, so..."

Harry sighed. "I hate these days. And you just know it's going to get worse."

A burst of fire and wail of phoenix song announced Fawkes' arrival.

"When you say things like that," Sirius chided. "You deserve what you get."

"Meh," Harry grumbled knowing that on *those* days it didn't matter what he said. He looked up at Fawkes. "Who gets the bad news? Me or him?"

Fawkes hovered in place glancing between Sirius and Harry before he flew off and landed on Sirius' shoulder.

Sirius accepted the parchment from Fawkes' grasp and opened it up. "It doesn't look too long."

Harry closed his eyes. "Does he know?"

Sirius skimmed the first paragraph. "No."

"No?" Harry repeated in surprise.

"Yes."

"Yes?" Harry repeated in confusion.

"I don't know," Sirius summarized with a shake of his head. He slowly began to nod. "Yeah... he knows."

"Origins not extracurricular activities, right?"

"Right," Sirius agreed. "He's basically forcing us to confirm his belief."

Harry looked up curiously. "How's he managing that?"

Sirius straightened out the letter and leaned forward with a Dumbledore-like hunch. He rasped out the words like an old man. *"I have puzzled over the familiarity I felt upon meeting the two of you. That was until last night when I came to an extremely unlikely and yet wholly possible conclusion."*

"Ahh crap," Harry grumbled.

Sirius held up a hand to stop Harry and continued. *"If this improbable theory of mine contains even a grain of truth, then putting it into a letter is a risk I shall not take. And so I ask you kindly to please humor this old man and come discuss my theory with me at your earliest convenience."*

"Our earliest convenience?" Harry repeated. "I'm thinking it won't be convenient for a very long time."

"Oh really?" Sirius smugly asked. He continued to read the letter. *"It would be remiss of me not to mention that so far I have not discussed my theory with anyone."*

Harry sighed. "You can almost hear the noose tightening."

"If neither of you have any interest in discussing my theory, then I will seek other sounding boards. And I would hate to give my good friends the Potters an unlikely and uncertain hope when that hope and my theory could be easily confirmed or denied by either of you."

Harry laughed helplessly. "That cheeky fucking bastard."

"I know," Sirius agreed. "It's so... Dumbledore."

"He knows," Harry grumbled. "And he's trying to make it sound like he just guessed."

"You think someone told him?" Sirius asked. "We've seen Tonks and Moony both today and I doubt Gin risked her oath. Unspeakables maybe?"

Harry considered and admitted. "Maybe but we can't discount the possibility that he did guess it."

"How do you want to handle this?"

Harry informed, "I'll go talk to him tonight."

"Tonight?" Sirius asked. "Just you?"

"If you don't mind," Harry said. "I think I'd rather go by myself."

"You're not going to kill him, are you?"

Harry looked at Sirius silently.

"Because I'll get Tonks and we got your alibi covered."

"I'm not going to kill him," Harry exasperatedly replied. "But if we both go see him, we'll look like wayward students sent to the Headmaster's office. If I go alone, he'll see me as an equal."

“And he wouldn’t see me as an equal?”

Harry shook his head. “There’s a difference between defeating a dark wizard and defeating a Dark Lord. It’s not really something...” Harry struggled to find the words.

“This is some of that crap you never want to talk about?”

Harry hadn’t been sure Sirius had even noticed. “Yeah.”

“And you’re certain you haven’t grown a vagina?”

“Yes, Sirius. I checked this morning.”

“Okay,” Sirius exclaimed looking around. “This place is creepier during the day than even the Shrieking Shack at night.”

“The Shrieking Shack isn’t scary,” Harry argued. “You’re part of the reason people think it’s haunted.”

“I’m not the one who starved eight children in the attic,” Sirius argued. “They’re the ones who scream on rainy nights.”

“What?”

“Do you know nothing about the Shrieking Shack?”

“That’s where Moony went to transform when he was a student,” Harry replied. “His howls and screams during transformation are why people think it’s haunted.”

“People don’t just think it’s haunted,” Sirius retorted. “It *is* haunted. By an entire Ravenclaw first year class. You know it was called the Shrieking Shack before I ever started at Hogwarts, right?”

Harry looked at his godfather curiously. “Really?”

“Yeah, really. Ask Albus tonight. He’ll tell you.” Sirius continued, “We tried to keep Moony company in there, but it was just too freaky with those screaming and whispering kids. That was why we started going out into the Forbidden Forest instead. It wasn’t like we originally

decided, '*Hey. Let's take the feral werewolf closer to the townspeople. Yeah, that's a good idea.*' No," Sirius shook his head. "We just got freaked out by that place."

"Really?"

Sirius nodded. "But this place even has an even creepier name." He was looking around the dilapidated and unkempt grounds. "The *Gaunt* House. It sounds like the opposite of a children's playground."

Harry glanced at his godfather. "And what name would sound like a children's playground?"

"Happytastic Funtabalous Land," Sirius suggested. "What are we looking for anyway?"

"There's a family ring around here," Harry added.

"The *Gaunt* family ring?" Sirius asked. "I'm guessing it likes to bite fingers off."

"The Gaunts were just this lowest branch of the Slytherin line," Harry explained, ducking under a broken dust-covered support beam.

"Slytherin? You mean...?"

Harry nodded. "Merope Gaunt used love potions to get a booty call out of a muggle named Tom Riddle. Named the little hellspawn after her rape victim, I mean his father."

"Voldemort's a... junior?" Sirius smiled. "I bet calling him junior would tick him off."

Harry approached the loose floorboard in the back closet. "This is... *ah crap.*"

"What?"

Harry jerked up and looked around. "I think I just broke a collapsing ward."

"What's a-"

“Collapsing wards do nothing but evaporate when any magical person or magic touches them. Even diagnostic spells to locate wards trigger them.”

“Do they just feel like a slight breeze you barely notice that tingles everywhere?” Sirius inquired curiously.

“Yeah.”

“Oh,” Sirius answered. “Then I may have felt one when we approached the property.”

“Crap,” Harry said, running up to the broken dirty window.

“What is it?”

Harry stared off into the woods behind the house. “Someone or ones may be watching us.”

Sirius looked into the darkness of the trees and saw nothing. “Want me to walk out there while you circle around the back?”

“No,” Harry said shaking his head. “The ring’s not here and I don’t think that’s Albus out there. Let’s just get out of here.” Harry grabbed Sirius’ wrist and apparated them both away.

The man had been expecting the collapsing wards to fall soon but he was momentarily shocked to feel it happen during the late afternoon in broad daylight. He quickly ensured his cloak would mask his presence and silently appeared under the cover of darkness in the woods behind the Gaunt House.

He spotted the two Lord Blacks walking into the ruins of the old home in mild shock. Suddenly one of the mysteries he’d been puzzling over began to make sense. He was thinking furiously over all that he knew of them when he felt another collapsing ward fall.

The man thought the Blacks located that way too quickly and before he knew it, Harry was right at the window staring at him. The man

didn't dare move as he saw Sirius walk up behind Harry, discussing something.

He finally exhaled when he both saw and heard the two Lords apparate away, right from inside the ruins of the Gaunt house.

The man heavily cloaked in black triggered a portkey on his wrist reappearing in a well furnished and protected home. He moved over towards his fireplace and tapped his wand three times on a highly magical stone.

He prepared himself a snifter of brandy and sat back in the chair where he did much of his deep thinking.

Two minutes later the fireplace flared and the man accepted the incoming call. Alan Weston's head appeared in the fireplace.

"You're thinking," Alan stated noticing the man known to many as 'That Fucker' was resting comfortably in a chair.

The man nodded. "I know who the Death Eater Bandits are and I know how the animagus got past my ward."

Alan blinked, admittedly impressed. "Who? How?"

The man looked over at Alan and replied, "It's because you're keyed into your wards."

"Me?"

The man in black nodded and took another sip of brandy.

"I don't follow."

The man took a deep relaxing breath and explained, "Any question of whether the Lord Blacks are *really* the Lords of the Black line has been answered."

"Wait," Alan paused. "You mean..."

The man nodded.

“So since I’m one of their vassals, if I’m allowed, then by extension they are allowed?”

“Something like that,” he agreed with a grin.

“How many people’s bitch am I?” Alan asked before jerking up in surprise. “I just realized another god damn Sirius Black isn’t letting me have warm sheets. That’s just fucking perfect.”

The man in the chair sighed. “You’re never going to let this go, are you?”

“It was a really nice dryer!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Harry appeared with a pop just off the path leading to Hogwarts.

He began the slow trudge up to the castle, all the while reminding himself the man he was meeting was not the Headmaster he knew, nor was he an enemy.

Harry saw light coming from Hagrid's cabin and thought back to his many happy memories of time spent in a world similar to this one. The Whomping Willow was swaying in the night breeze.

Harry looked around him and saw no one in sight. He picked up a rock off the path and threw it straight towards the dangerous tree. The willow eagerly swatted the rock right back to Harry.

Recognizing the tree seemed in a playful mood, Harry picked up half a dozen more rocks with his invisible, magical appendages and proceeded to throw them all towards the tree. He easily kept up with the magical old willow catching all the rocks and throwing them right back as if the two of them were playing several simultaneous games of catch.

"Lord Black?" Albus cautiously asked as he walked up behind Harry.

Harry's arms caught all of the rocks headed his way and held onto them this time as he turned and greeted, "Headmaster."

The Whomping Willow let out a whistling sigh and appeared to deflate upon the realization that its fun had come to an end.

Albus smiled at Harry. "I can honestly say I've never seen the Whomping Willow used quite like that."

Harry launched a rock one last time towards the tree, admitting, "First time for me too."

The tree was fully capable of nursing a grudge and swung a thick branch right at the final rock, sending it flying up to the castle. There was a loud crack when the stone smacked against the window of the

Headmaster's office and bounced helplessly off the magically reinforced glass.

Albus looked at the tree and his office's tower. "I think she's upset I interrupted you."

"She?" Harry asked. "The Whomping Willow is female?"

"Does she seem like a 'he' to you?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I suppose not."

"I did not expect to see you so soon," Albus admitted, inspecting Harry. "Am I only to be graced by one Lord Black this evening?"

"Just me," Harry answered and turned towards the castle. "Have you got time for a conversation?"

"For one as enlightening as this one promises to be," Albus waved Harry forward and began walking in step with him. "I will happily clear my schedule."

"You're enjoying this entirely too much," Harry admitted with a smile as he walked next to Albus.

"Shall I invite certain guests to join us?" Albus inquired. "Perhaps some others for whom-"

"No," Harry interrupted. "In fact, I was thinking we might both benefit from a charm of brotherhood."

Albus showed only slight surprise at the suggestion. The most common charm of brotherhood entwined two people to the point that they would know when their 'brother' was lying to them, telling them the truth, or hiding something. It additionally would protect one brother's secrets based on the will of that brother. So if Albus' desire to tell someone a secret of Harry's was not stronger than Harry's desire for Albus not to tell, then Albus would be unable to. "Do you really think that's necessary?"

“Necessary? No,” Harry replied. “But I’m here offering to be as honest with you as you are with me. I’m also going to ask that you not tell any of your *alternate sounding boards*,” Harry gave Albus an accusing look, “any of your theories about me or Sirius.”

Albus had the decency to look bashful before replying, “Do you really think that’s fair?”

“*Extremely* fair,” Harry eagerly answered.

“Harry,” Albus chided.

“Albus,” Harry retorted as they arrived at the Headmaster’s office. “It’s fair because I’m limiting your freedom to discuss it with others, and in turn willingly discussing it with you myself. It’s a charm of brotherhood. It’s built for fairness.”

Albus circled around to sit behind his desk. “I meant fair to others. People like the Potters for what they don’t know, or the Lupins for what they do.”

Harry plopped down into a comfortable chair. He knew Albus wanted him as an ally and couldn’t resist the thirst for knowledge. “This charm, and this conversation, is for you and me. Not them.”

Albus sat there silently for a minute before nodding. “I can accept that. Tea?” He swished his wand and conjured a complete steaming set.

“Tea second,” Harry said casting a spell over his right hand making it glow. He stuck it out towards Albus. “Charm first.”

Albus set down the teapot and cast the same charm of brotherhood over his hand. “Very well.” He shook Harry’s hand sealing the spell as both their hands faded to normal. “How do you take it?”

“One sugar please,” Harry replied and accepted the cup of tea.

Albus took a sip from his cup and sat back. He set the cup down and smiled happily.

Harry saw how pleased Albus looked and resisted the urge to groan. "You know you're smiling more than Sirius does when his one night stand leaves in the morning."

Albus just grinned and sought confirmation. "Your godfather, Sirius?"

Harry set his cup onto Albus' desk. "You're just dying to jump right into things, aren't you?"

"I make no secret of my desire for understanding."

"A rather annoying old man once told me the truth is a beautiful and terrible thing," Harry quipped. "And that it should be treated with great caution."

"Who said that?"

"You did," Harry succinctly replied. "Well, not exactly you."

Albus nodded, having suspected as much. "You have me at a disadvantage."

"Said the blackmailer," Harry retorted.

Albus frowned but saw little point in quibbling over words.

"Just ask what you want to, Albus," Harry helplessly admitted.

"What have I done to give you such a low opinion of me?" Albus questioned. He added with a smile, "Or not exactly me."

Harry bit the inside of his cheek. "Can we start with something simpler?"

"Very well," Albus agreed. "How about this one: tell me Harry Potter, why are you so opposed to your family, *to your parents*, knowing just who you are?"

Harry winced. "Because I don't know them. And there's already enough drama in my life."

"But you do know the Lupins?"

Harry sighed and figured he should start from the beginning. "Alright, first off, I suppose you need a little alternate history lesson. Halloween 1981, in the reality I grew up in, the Dark Lord Voldemort attacked at Godric's Hollow."

Albus nodded, urging Harry to go on.

"My parents were home that night," Harry explained. "And that night they died protecting me. So I've never known any James or Lily Potter. Sirius, my godfather, came through the Exit-

"The Exit?"

Harry nodded. "The Exit, the veil, the death chamber, the stone archway in the Department of Mysteries, whatever you want to call it, my godfather fell through it over ten years ago. I began researching it in February. A by-product of my work was Sirius fell out the other side and into this world just a few months ago. So when he woke up in a hospital bed, he asked for Remus Lupin, his best friend in our reality. Hence, Tonks and Remus knew about me and my history before I ever arrived in this world."

Albus was tempted to inquire about the specifics of crossing over but wanted to understand Harry better. "That does not explain why you have not told your parents."

"James and Lily Potter seem like nice people," Harry admitted. "But they're not my parents."

"Not exactly," Albus replied using Harry's own words.

"Sirius was going to tell James who he was," Harry explained. "But when they met Sirius realized just how different this James Potter was from my dad."

"Those two do seem to rub each other the wrong way, don't they?"

Harry shrugged. "I can see it from both sides."

"And yet you choose to continue to deceive your 'not quite' parents."

Harry gave Albus a significant look. "It's only dumb luck that in this world there is a middle-aged couple who dealt with the grief of losing a baby and raised two other kids. My parents never saw twenty-two. You really think getting to know the Potters will tell me anything about my parents? They never even met them."

"Then perhaps you could give a middle-aged couple who dealt with the grief of losing a baby some peace of mind to know in other worlds their son has lived a healthy, happy life?"

Harry laughed. "You're really something else."

"I shall take that as a compliment."

Harry took another sip of his tea. "I know you want to stay on our good side. All I ask is that you let us tell the Potters in our own time."

Albus took a moment to observe Harry. "I can agree to that as long as you keep me informed of the people you do share the knowledge of your unique origins with."

"Albus," Harry sighed tiredly and glanced over at Fawkes empty perch. "I am not your student, nor an Order member. Those I and Sirius confide in are our business, not yours."

"I understand," Albus backtracked. "I just think it's in both of our best interests to keep this to ourselves for now."

Harry looked at Albus speculatively. "I would have thought you'd be a lot more vocal in championing an awkward reunion of sorts."

"The fewer people aware that there is a new candidate for the prophecy, the better."

Realization crossed Harry's face and he shook his head. "Sorry, Albus. But that prophecy isn't about me."

"You defeated the Voldemort of your world, didn't you?"

"What makes you think that?"

Albus smiled. "You dueled him. And you were entirely too confident and comfortable. Sirius hid it pretty well, but his eyes showed worry and fear. Your only fear was for Sirius."

"Yes," Harry admitted with a mixture of pain and pride. "I did defeat my Voldemort. But I can't *vanquish* this one any more than you can."

Albus frowned at the truthfulness he sensed. "Are you certain?"

"I have some idea of the costs you paid to defeat your Dark Lord," Harry instructed. "And in case you missed it, Voldemort is not a dark wizard. He's a genuine Dark Lord and all that that implies."

Albus winced as though the confirmation hurt him. "I had hoped that wasn't the case."

Harry grinned helplessly. "The muggles have a saying about putting all your hopes in one hand and then sh-"

"I'm familiar with the saying," Albus interrupted. "Thank you, Harry."

"Just trying to help."

Albus frowned in thought. "Was the cost to you simply too high to pay again?"

Harry considered the question before answering. "Yeah... I don't know. I'm not sure to be honest. But fortunately for me, it's not possible to pay again so I don't have to think about it."

"What was your cost?"

Harry was surprised Albus was asking so boldly. He let no emotion show as he watched the old man.

Albus nodded in understanding and voluntarily admitted, "I sacrificed the ability to father children and then I lost the ability to fall in love."

Harry hadn't known the specifics but guessed it had been something close to that for Albus. He knew how high that cost would be to a

wizard like Albus. With a lick of his lips, Harry softly admitted, “I sacrificed my mother’s everlasting soul.”

Albus blinked in shock. “And what did you lose?”

Harry slowly shook his head. “My sacrifice was deemed sufficient.”

Albus couldn’t even imagine what Harry felt. The word came out as a whisper. “How?”

“When I was a baby she gave her life to protect me from Voldemort. It meant his next Killing Curse marked my noggin and bounced back into his face. It also left me with a protection from him.” Harry frowned adding, “until he overcame that too.”

Albus nodded in comprehension. “And since you carried her protection...”

“I was able to offer a soul other than my own,” Harry finished for him. He sighed tiredly. “The worst part is that whenever I’m near the Lily Potter around here, the old magic wakes up and pulls on her soul. I’m like a harmless but annoying personal dementor to her.”

“She mentioned feeling a draw to you,” Albus agreed. “I assumed it was a mother’s intuition not a... soul-sucking vortex.”

“Don’t just think like a wizard. Any muggle will tell you it’s *always* a soul-sucking vortex.”

Albus saw the forced smile as Harry tried to joke about his sacrifice. He could tell this was not a burden Harry had dealt with as much as one the young man had simply ignored. He immediately concluded that Lily Potter would be a tremendous help to Harry.

“Stop scheming,” Harry grumbled. “I feel you plotting against me.”

“Sorry,” Albus reflexively replied, well aware Harry would sense he wasn’t sorry in the slightest. “I don’t suppose you have a second mother’s sacrificial protection and the willingness to barter their soul?”

Harry shook his head. "Just the one. But I do have a rather pesky ghost haunting me."

Albus hadn't expected such a serious response. "Do you think he...?"

"Nope," Harry snapped. "I tried her first. Didn't work. She's kind of sensitive about it now."

"I would imagine so."

Harry smiled wanly. "Unfortunately, it furthered her delusion that we're destined to be together forever."

"I know a tribal chief skilled in matters of necromancy and souls," Albus offered.

"Believe me I've thought it about, *often*," Harry assured him. "But she usually behaves. And she was a good friend long before she became an ex."

"You're haunted by an ex-girlfriend?" Albus clarified smothering his own amusement. "Say the word. I can send a letter to my friend."

"Nah," Harry shook his head thinking how he actually needed Ginny's ghostly expertise. "She's a nuisance, but it's nice to have someone else who remembers our old world."

Albus grinned as he felt the charm of brotherhood's nudge indicating that Harry was hiding something. "Old world? Does that mean you are here to stay?"

"Yeah, that's the plan. The Exit to our old world was destroyed after I got pulled in. Wouldn't know how to get back even if it was still intact."

"Not expecting any visitors? And no travelers beyond yourself and Sirius?"

"The one I studied was used for executions a century ago but it had been misaligned. When I corrected it, Sirius was the only one spit out in this world, from what I'm told."

Albus nodded. "I believe it was 1903 when the dementor's kiss replaced execution as the highest form of punishment in our courts."

"Sounds about right."

Albus took another sip of his tea, thinking over all he'd learned so far. "Do you think perhaps it is your hope that the prophecy doesn't refer to you that's influencing your interpretation?"

"I'm not some wayward child, Albus," Harry retorted as he sat up a bit prouder. "I didn't just get a lucky shot in a duel. It was several years after *your death* that I finally defeated the bastard. And I don't appreciate feeling like a pawn in the game you're playing."

Albus raised his hands in deference. "I am sorry if my conversation feels like manipulation to you. But it sounds like my counterpart may have wronged you and that is coloring your perceptions. To use your metaphor, I am not the chess master, but just another piece in the same game you are."

"I want no part of that game."

"I wish it were that simple," Albus admitted. "And while you may not be the king I'd hoped, you are still a knight, the same as me. Maybe you've not moved from your spot and maybe you won't have to, but I assure you, you are most definitely on the board."

Harry frowned. "I think you've driven the metaphor into the ground."

"I thought I might have," Albus admitted reaching for the candy dish on his desk. He pondered whether he even wanted to know. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Obviously, you've just done so," Harry said with a smirk.

Albus grinned. "I've used that line on you, haven't I?"

Harry gave an affirmative nod and urged Albus to continue.

"Would it be beneficial for me to inquire about the details of my counterpart's demise?"

Harry saw Albus was leaving the decision up to him. "It is not a situation that will repeat itself here, but it might help you to understand our relationship a bit better."

Albus sensed Harry was more affected than he was showing. "You were there, weren't you?"

Harry nodded. "Alright, first off, in my totally objective and unbiased opinion you should realize Severus Snape of my old world is a bigger asshole than you'd find on a blind giant's narcoleptic bride."

Albus looked vaguely unsettled as he processed the meaning. "Severus?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted before pausing. "I'm not sure the details of this world's Snape, but in my old one he joined the Death Eaters right out of school. There was probably some reason like the executive washroom for inner circle members had too much gold trim for his delicate sense of aesthetics. Whatever it was, he quickly turned traitor, secretly stabbing his new friends in the back, and became the Order's spy in the Dark Lord's organization."

Albus was fighting a smile. "You could just say you weren't aware of Severus' motives."

"You weren't exactly forthcoming with that information any more than Snape was," Harry retorted. "As a result, you were the only person who trusted him. Probably on either side, come to think of it."

"This is leading somewhere, isn't it," Albus encouraged. "You're not just insulting my Potions professor?"

"Contrary to what you imply, merely insulting your Potions professor is in fact an excellent and worthwhile way to pass the time," Harry argued. "But yes, I'm getting there."

Albus muttered to himself, "Maybe it's a Potter thing."

"How do you think Snape would respond if all the Potters were dead except for a baby, especially one hailed as the savior and hero of the wizarding world while still in diapers?"

Albus briefly wondered if Severus would be able to set aside his bitterness. He stifled a snort. "Understood."

"Anyways, I'm just trying to explain the fact that my entire fifth year at Hogwarts you avoided me, until the end of the year when Sirius died—or *what passed for dead at the time*—and you only then informed me of the prophecy."

Albus frowned uncertainly.

"I say this so you understand that in sixth year, when you'd finally started to become something of a mentor to me, it was a pretty shitty thing you did."

"And what did I do?"

"You petrified me and covered me with an invisibility cloak as Death Eaters stormed the Astronomy Tower. Then you allowed yourself to get captured and let or more likely invited Severus to strike you down with a Killing Curse, sending you to your death and a grisly fall."

Albus sat there silently allowing Harry to speak.

"I couldn't move until you were dead," Harry weakly relayed. "I know Severus Snape could never really take you, but I guess you wanted to give him iron-clad proof of his loyalty to the Dark Lord. I think you had to have been sick and dying anyway, but I couldn't even get confirmation of that."

Albus steepled his fingers in thought, "You will have a better idea of my counterpart's motivation but I am sorry you had to see that."

"That's when things really started to go to hell in a hand basket too. With you dead, people lost hope and just wanted to give up. The second war got really bad after that."

Albus was saddened but could identify with the burden his counterpart had carried. "Were we close?"

"Kind of, yeah," Harry paused thinking neither yes nor no sounded right. "I think we should've been closer and I don't doubt that you

loved me like a grandson, but you messed up a lot where I'm concerned."

"Enlighten me," Albus cheerfully instructed. "So that I may avoid making the same mistakes."

Harry stopped himself from saying, 'just don't force me back to the Dursleys.' He took a sip of his tea and looked up at the eager Headmaster. "Don't worry. You can't make those particular mistakes again. I just had the one childhood to ruin and fragile emotional psyche to shatter. And besides, we've talked about my old world plenty. For all intents and purposes, that world was a long waking dream for me. Let's talk about this one."

"The experiences of our pasts define who we are today," Albus intoned. "But we can talk about this world. Would you like to join the Order?"

Harry fought a smile. "That was abrupt."

Albus nodded. "I suspect you will not accept my invitation at first, so I thought I should begin laying the groundwork for future overtures."

"Blunt honesty too," Harry grinned. "I'll give you points for effort."

Albus looked at Harry hopefully but nodded when the younger man made his denial clear. "Luckily for him but perhaps unfortunately for the Order, Severus Snape has never been a Death Eater in this world."

Harry gave a look of mischief. "Are you sure? Would you bet your life on that?"

"I trust Severus Snape," Albus said. "But alas, there are grains of truth in some of the stories surrounding his ill-fated attempt to join the Dark Lord."

"If I promise not to enjoy them too much, could you tell me the real ones?"

Albus scrutinized Harry. "I sincerely doubt you could make that promise."

"True," Harry agreed before forcing a twinkle into his eye. "Pretty please?"

"I hope that look you made rarely worked on me."

"Never tried it on you," Harry said. "But it never worked on Hermione."

"Hermione *Granger*?" Albus asked and received an affirmative response. "Is that why you abducted her and took her to Africa?"

"Just having a spot of fun," Harry replied. "And I'm quite sure my best friend Hermione would agree that this Hermione needed a kick in the pants and a poke in the-"

"Harry," Albus warned.

"...eye," Harry innocently finished. "Weren't you about to tell me about Snape's ill-fated attempt?"

Albus took his time but obliged. "Severus had been denied back when he was student. But he had an acquaintance prepared to vouch for him. I called in a few favors and secured him a Ministry exemption for all non-harmful dark arts."

"Non-harmful?"

Albus nodded. "Severus' potion making skills were never in question, but it was required that he demonstrate some other coveted talents. He led his initiation evaluators-"

"Wait," Harry interrupted. "Initiation evaluators?"

"They may have been having a laugh at Severus' expense, but yes, they referred to themselves as initiation evaluators. As I was saying, Severus led them to a muggle woman that he specifically targeted."

Harry grinned. "Yeah?"

Albus took a breath and reluctantly explained. "He intended to sow chaos and discord among countless muggles worldwide."

"He didn't attack the Queen, did he?"

Albus shook his head quickly. "That rumor is patently false. No, the woman is simply an author, just an extremely popular one. His plan was to 'torture' muggles with a poorly written story."

Harry goggled. "*That* was his grand plan?"

Albus winced. "Had I known his intentions beforehand I would have advised him against that course of action. But he had decided I would be better off ignorant of the details of his less than legal activities."

"I take it the initiation evaluators were unimpressed?"

Albus took off his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose. "More amused than anything else. He misinterpreted their laughter and cheers and made a few boisterous comments that have since taken on a life of their own."

"Like what?"

"I believe the Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes offer a shirt exclaiming, '*We will get them where we can hurt them the most. We will attack ... at their leisure.*'"

"At their leisure?" Harry snickered.

"There may have been some strutting and billowing of his cloak when he said it."

Harry smiled at the image before frowning in consternation. "Does that mean you have no ears within the Dark Lord's ranks?"

Albus schooled his face showing no emotion. "It shouldn't surprise you that I won't be answering that question."

"Good point," Harry admitted. "So what can you tell me about That Fucker?"

Albus was momentarily shocked. "Excuse me?"

"Are *you* That Fucker?" Harry asked while openly inspecting Albus.

"I assume you are referring to the mysterious wizard in black who occupies much of Voldemort's time?"

"Damn," Harry swore, knowing it was an unlikely possibility. "That would have almost made sense."

Albus could tell Harry had concluded that he wasn't the mysterious wizard. "What do you know of the wizard that led you to suspect me?"

"Not much," Harry admitted. "Just that it's someone strong enough and willing to stand up to the Dark Lord."

"I will admit that is a woefully short list."

"And," Harry interrupted. "And I know this mysterious wizard didn't show up until after the disappearance of Neville Longbottom. Perhaps someone who knows the two first candidates were dead and he needed to wait for another son born at the end of a July. Someone with a little too much faith in the prophecy, believing he cannot vanquish the Dark Lord. So he does all he can to thwart Voldemort without actively engaging him."

"You've thought this through," Albus replied slightly surprised he was a suspect.

Harry shrugged. "I would imagine that sometimes you... 'limit your arsenal' let's say. Because you are so widely perceived to be and looked upon as the consummate light wizard and role model."

"You think I could hide behind a mask and be a bit more ruthless?"

Harry snorted. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

Albus frowned playfully. "No, I think you've answered it quite clearly."

Harry scratched his head. "In retrospect, it does sound a bit nutty. Even for you."

"I'd like to think so," Albus agreed. "I should point out one fallacy of your logic is that the idea of waiting on a new subject for the prophecy is one that's widely shared by others. There are many people out there who actively avoid having children near the end of July for that very reason."

"Makes sense."

"Yes, well there are also those that induce birth just before midnight and the calendar turns to August, almost always leading to complications."

"You're kidding."

Albus shook his head. "I'm afraid not. It appears that night is as cursed as the Defense Against the Dark Arts position. Speaking of, have you ever considered teaching?"

Harry looked at Albus incredulously. "Bite me."

Albus chuckled. "A 'no' would have been sufficient."

"But not as effective," Harry assured him. "I take it you're not one of those keeping their eyes on the maternity ward around the end of July?"

Albus sighed and sat back tiredly in his chair. "For many years, I had been holding on to the hope that Neville Longbottom is still out there."

Harry noticed the use of 'had' rather than 'have.' "You don't believe that anymore?"

Albus looked at Harry innocently. "Not for the last couple of days, no."

Harry was quick to anger. "You still think its-"

"Please, Harry," Albus stopped him. "I firmly understand that you do not believe the prophecy applies to you. I may have reservations but I do not doubt that you have none. I'm not trying to pester you. I'm merely admitting that until a couple days ago, I had never questioned

whether Neville was still out there somewhere. I had to believe he was. Your appearance gives me doubt.”

“It’s not me,” Harry childishly pouted.

“Do keep in mind that until this conversation I was unaware that you already had defeated a Dark Lord and that Voldemort legitimately was one,” Albus pointed out. “I don’t think the prophecy refers to you, but I’m not certain. And you definitely... shake things up a bit.”

“So you haven’t squirreled Neville away for some special secret training?” Harry asked and saw the look on Albus’ face. “Didn’t think so. And you don’t think Neville is That Fucker?”

Albus looked at Harry curiously. “I assume from your preoccupation that your world had no such unknown wizard in black.”

“Nope. My world was quite a bit different from this one,” Harry admitted with a shrug. “Hell, probably the second most dangerous person and right hand to the Dark Lord was Bellatrix.”

“Really?” Albus asked in happy surprise. “I always knew Miss Black was quite powerful but... is that why you wanted to separate her from the Dark Lord?”

Harry blinked. “Sure, I mean, that and... she’s hot.”

“I hardly think being attractive should matter in this.”

“Maybe not,” Harry playfully admitted. “But it helps when we loan her out for sex to our guests.”

“Harry,” Albus reprimanded.

“Why do you think Jimmy likes coming over so much?”

Albus lightly reminded, “With the charm, I can tell when you’re lying.”

“Right,” Harry agreed. “And Bellatrix is carrying Remus’ illegitimate baby.”

Albus furrowed his brow in uncertainty. “At least I thought I could.”

Harry's eyes were twinkling merrily.

"Do you think perhaps I could speak to Miss Black?" Albus saw Harry's look and added, "I'm willing to swear an oath to protect her from incriminating herself."

"I'm not going to force her or even encourage her," Harry replied. "But I'll ask for you. It's up to her."

"Thank you," Albus said with an approving nod.

Harry saw Albus was already thinking about what to ask Bellatrix and changed the subject. "How'd he die?"

Albus looked up. "Who?"

"Neville."

"That," Albus answered in irritation, "I do not know."

Harry nodded, urging Albus to elaborate.

"The Longbottoms were protected by a Fidelius Charm that was not broken," Albus explained. "I, myself, put up several other monitoring wards and security measures."

"Anything interesting?" Harry asked. He explained, "Wards are something of a hobby of mine."

Albus inclined his head. "Are you familiar with the Greek wizard, Stavros?"

Harry let out a low whistle. "Those are some nice wards. Inside or outside the Fidelius?"

"Outside," Albus replied. "I didn't know they could be placed inside."

Harry nodded. "You'll need two separate sets of stones, and the inside ones have to be placed first. Then put up the Fidelius on the outer set, and bring in a second caster unaware of the Fidelius secret. You have to cast them blind because of the Fidelius, but they come out a lot stronger, bound within the secret."

“Interesting,” Albus commented imagining how difficult casting Stavros wards blindly would be. “I can tell you according to my monitors Neville never left the property. And after many inspections, I also can tell that he no longer lives within the wards.”

“Yeah,” Harry nodded. “That points to dead.”

“The most damning evidence was his mother’s intuition.”

Harry blinked having not even considered Neville’s parents. “ Alice thinks he’s dead?”

Albus nodded. “I wonder if perhaps she felt a bond with her son disappear. She was certain he was dead and took her own life a month after Neville’s disappearance.”

Harry was immediately reminded of the story he’d given Lily Potter and frowned. “That sucks.”

“Quite.”

Harry doubted the Neville he knew could even imagine leaving his parents with so much grief. “What about Frank?”

Albus smiled. “Were the Longbottoms friends of yours in your world?”

“Naw,” Harry replied. “Bellatrix *crucio*ed their brains out when Neville was a baby. But Neville was a friend of mine... ‘til he died.”

Albus frowned uncertainly. “Sometimes I think you’re just messing with me.”

“Who? Moi?” Harry meekly said before abandoning the charade. “I could never pull off innocent. Even in the rare times I was innocent.”

“Funny,” Albus deadpanned. “The charm seems to think you’re lying.”

“Alright,” Harry softly conceded. “Maybe I can pull off innocent.”

“Neville,” Albus paused. “Neville was a very bright young boy. His situation gave him few social opportunities, but he had a love of learning and books that reminded me of myself.”

“Nerd, huh?”

“The Longbottoms had a pond in their backyard covered by the Fidelius and Neville could almost always be found under the shade of a tree reading. He barely ever left the home and wards, but he still carried a Martin Miggs backpack with him everywhere he went. He got tired of having to choose which of his favorite books could fit so he got a hold of his mother’s wand and managed to charm his backpack larger on the inside.” Albus smiled sadly. “I was so impressed that I offered to charm it featherweight for him.”

Harry gave Albus a moment as he saw the old man was lost in memories. “So how did the prophecy get out?”

Albus muffled a displeased grumble. “I was always opposed to it getting out to anyone. Rumors had been spreading and then the papers started reporting unsubstantiated prophecies. Frank explicitly ignored my strongly worded advice and leaked the real prophecy’s content and details.”

“Doggie got off his leash?” Harry suggested. He gulped at the look on Albus’ face and apologized immediately. “Sorry. Continue.”

“Frank and I rarely saw eye to eye on what was in Neville’s best interests.”

Harry was tempted to ask if Albus wanted Neville abused and unloved but held his tongue. “Like what?”

“There should never be a fine line between raising a son and raising a soldier,” Albus answered. “And Frank felt Hogwarts would slow Neville down.”

“That’s like a kick in the balls to you, isn’t it?”

Albus smiled. “I think the majority of the lessons at Hogwarts are not learned in the classrooms. Here is where children become young adults, learn to make friends, learn to care, learn to heal, *and* learn magic. Special students can always be accommodated with advanced tutoring but to view the Hogwarts experience as nothing more than training for-”

“Down boy,” Harry interrupted. “I’m with you. Hogwarts, yay.”

Albus calmed. He reached for his candy dish and popped one in his mouth. “Yay indeed.”

“So what’s Frank up to these days?”

Albus pursed his lips on the sour candy in his mouth. “I haven’t seen him in six years. He’s been trying to run away from his past. I visited him after he’d checked himself into a home for mental healing in Australia. The healer felt I would help Frank confront some of his issues. I don’t think he’s returned to England in over twenty years.”

Harry frowned and wondered if catatonic Frank might have been better off. “So who do you think That Fucker is? Straight answer, please.”

“I haven’t the foggiest,” Albus happily replied. “I spent many years trying to uncover more on the mysterious wizard in black.”

“Surely you’ve got a guess,” Harry pleaded.

“I have several guesses, none of which seem remotely probable. And no, I wouldn’t care to share them,” Albus grinned.

“Why not?”

“Harry, I don’t know who he is but I have crossed his path on a couple of occasions,” Albus explained. “One time I unwittingly walked right into a trap of his and found myself bound and wandless. He let me go with only minor humiliation, leading me to believe he is not an enemy. And the mystery of his identity has kept Voldemort occupied and confused for decades now.”

“You?” Harry repeated doubtfully. “Don’t know something and are willing to leave it be? Really?”

“Yes, really. The wizard in black has managed to keep his identity from both myself and Voldemort. And as long as it remains secret, Voldemort will be hesitant and tentative. I have a very good idea of how much worse things could be.”

“From what I hear That Fucker avoids confronting Voldemort. Not that he’s scared or unable but that he’s just being annoying.”

Albus smiled widely. “That sounds like vaguely familiar press for a couple of new Lords I know.”

Harry realized he’d walked right into that one. “Yeah, but we’re pretty.”

Albus paused contemplating whether to contend that point before moving on. “I think it’s possible that the wizard in black is doing all he can.”

“What do you mean?”

“He is remarkably well-informed,” Albus replied. “And it is entirely possible that the magic of the Dark Mark prevents people from directly confronting Voldemort.”

“You think he’s a Death Eater?” Harry asked in surprise while running through all the inner circle names he could remember.

Albus shrugged. “I have several guesses. Some more plausible than others.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry questioned. “What’s your craziest?”

“I haven’t exactly ranked them,” Albus replied. “But a number of questions remain about your counterpart’s death.”

Harry recalled what Bellatrix had revealed. “You think it might be me?”

“I never said that, I said questions remain. I don’t know what you’ve been told, but there was nothing natural about the manner in which Voldemort killed you. Foul, dark magic unlike any I’ve felt before was involved.” Albus shuddered. “It wasn’t like any summoning ritual I’ve read about, but your deaths were not simple murder.”

Harry smothered a grin. “You think Voldemort might have summoned a demon That Fucker?”

"You asked for the craziest," Albus replied. "But I get the feeling you know more about that night than I."

Harry looked at Albus before answering, "I suppose unless you're confronted with it, you assume Voldemort's claims of nearing immortality are nothing more than hollow boasting."

Dumbledore blanched and whispered out, "What?"

Harry winced and asked, "Have you ever heard of a... horcrux?"

Albus pursed his lips and searched the recesses of his mind. "I don't think I have."

Harry sensed only truth from the charm and nodded. He almost wished he could take that word back but figured he'd let the Headmaster figure it out on his own. "So that's your craziest?"

Albus considered pushing Harry on the subject but realized Harry wanted him to discover something himself. He would ask Harry more questions when he had the right questions to ask. "Well, I suppose now we should give serious consideration to the possibility of travelers from another world."

"Touché," Harry agreed.

Albus took a moment to choose his words carefully. "May I ask you something personal?"

Harry glanced at his watch. "Yeah, sure. But don't waste your last question on something you know I won't answer. I'm going to get going after this."

"I was hoping to hear in your own words why you aren't more opposed to the Dark Lord Voldemort."

Harry looked up. "Truthfully? I guess it's really that he hasn't done anything to me. I'm like the out-of-towner who just moved to a new country. While I'm not in favor of my neighbor's death, I don't feel any attachment to them. And as different as the worlds are, I can't see the

same darkness in similar eyes nor do I receive the same kindness from the familiar faces.

“For me it’s simply like everyone are strangers wearing masks of my old friends. If I have to view them that way, then a wizard wearing a mask of the Dark Lord must be held to the same standard. So far this Voldemort took his ass-kicking and has left me alone. My old Headmaster always told me it was the choices we make that define who we are.”

Albus grumbled good-naturedly. “That sounds like my usual trite rubbish.”

“I would probably try and argue that Sirius and I have already been through a war and deserve a break, but we’re both adrenaline junkies who enjoy havoc too much for that excuse to hold water.”

“You don’t say,” Albus dryly agreed.

“But the other main thing is that I absolutely adore the fact that my life in this world has been so relaxing and... *normal*! I’m just another wizard here. It’s beyond refreshing.”

Albus blinked in shock. He made sure the brotherhood charm was still in effect. “Well on behalf of this world, we’re happy to have you.”

“Thank you.”

“Now do you mind paying a little rent and vanquishing the Dark Lord?”

“Albus...”

“I’m willing to treat you normal.”

Harry felt the charm twitch. “Liar.”

Albus was about to clarify when he sensed a warning. He held up a hand stopping Harry from talking just as the current Head Boy burst into the Headmaster’s office.

Harry glanced over at the out of breath youngest Potter. "Jimmy?"

Jimmy was gob smacked staring at Harry and the Headmaster in turn. He was panting from sprinting down here and pulled the magical parchment out of his pocket to make sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him.

Harry saw the Headmaster looking genuinely surprised and did not recognize the Marauder's Map for what it was.

Albus leaned forward and asked, "Mr. Potter? What is so important that you felt the need to burst into my office?"

Jimmy looked at the map and back three more times continuing to ignore the Headmaster. He stared right at Harry, begging for an explanation. "You're Harry... *Potter?*"

Harry flashed an irritated look at Albus and stood up. "I think that's about as crystal clear as a cue to leave can be."

"No, wait!" Jimmy pleaded. "I just... I mean... *huh?*"

"Do not pass on this golden opportunity," Albus warned Harry. "And I hope to speak to you again soon, Harry."

Harry glanced at his hand and then the Headmaster. "Feel like leaving the charm up?"

"Delighted to," Albus agreed.

Harry slung an arm over the confused and wary Head Boy's shoulder. "Tell me, Jimmy, have you ever played the obliviate game?"

"Harry!" Albus scolded.

"Good point," Harry nodded firmly. "Let's get you away from these pesky over-protective Hogwarts wards."

Jimmy looked to the Headmaster before turning to Harry and shrugging. "Okay."

"James?" Albus warily inquired.

“As Head Boy I can leave the grounds,” Jimmy claimed. “Besides, he’s my brother. What’s he gonna do?”

“Yes Albus,” Harry parroted. “What am I going to do?”

Albus slumped back in his chair in tired acceptance of the situation. “Good night, *children*,” he pouted with emphasis on the last word.

“Refresh my memory,” Jimmy said beginning the walk down the spiral staircase. “I think I’ve played the obliviate game before but I’m kind of fuzzy on the rules.”

Albus really hoped Jimmy was kidding.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Harry and Jimmy walked down the path from Hogwarts silently. Harry wasn't saying anything, and Jimmy was trying his best not to jump in front of Harry and shake the answers out of him.

"Hey Harry?"

"Not now."

Jimmy nodded in understanding and kept quiet for about five seconds. "Can I ask when?"

Harry glanced over and answered, "When we're drunk."

Jimmy frowned. "I'm not sure I-"

"*When we're drunk*," Harry repeated forcefully.

"Okay," Jimmy agreed. He held his tongue for almost ten seconds this time. "Are you going to obliviate me?"

Harry winced. "The odds of your memory staying intact are better if we're drunk."

"Works for me," Jimmy happily jumped onboard with the drinking plan.

"And if I'm drunk," Harry helpfully added, "the odds are also higher that a memory charm won't stick for long."

"Sounds good," Jimmy agreed, keeping up with Harry's brisk pace.

Harry admitted, "I suppose the same could be said of the odds that I'll memory charm a little too much. Like a year or three."

"That's not so good."

Harry shrugged with a smile as they reached the main street in Hogsmeade. They both slowed down when they spotted Sirius chatting up a couple of ladies in the middle of the village.

"Is that...?"

“Yeah,” Harry slowly answered.

As they got closer they saw Sirius was pushing a mentally challenged-looking man with thick bulbous goggles and a red plastic helmet around in a wheelchair.

Harry glanced at Jimmy worriedly. “Sirius is so going to hell.”

Jimmy opened his mouth and then closed it. He feebly argued, “There could be a completely rational explanation for that.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a sudden exclamation from the helmeted blonde in the wheelchair. “I was born Lucius Malfoy, Junior!”

“Okay,” Jimmy conceded. “You’re right. Hell it is. But probably a funny hell.”

“Lord Black,” Harry loudly greeted as he and Jimmy walked up.

“Lord Black,” Sirius cheerfully replied.

“Hell-low!” the special needs man shouted.

“Hello,” Sirius and the two ladies with him happily echoed back.

“I was born Lucius Malfoy, Junior!”

“Okay,” Harry agreed before turning to address his widely smiling godfather. “Sirius?”

Sirius made an exaggerated show of looking at his watch. “You know what? It’s probably time I got Squibby back to his secret room at St. Mungo’s. You ready to go home, Squibby?”

“Hell-low!” the man bellowed affirmatively.

“It’s been a pleasure meeting you Nancy, Sophie,” Sirius bid goodbye with a nod. “Say goodbye, Squibby.”

“Hell-low!” he said.

“Goodbye, you cutie,” the two women said bending down to squeeze the wheelchair bound man’s cheek. “Such a heartbreaker you are.”

“I was born Lucius Malfoy, Junior!” he shouted as Sirius wheeled him away.

Harry and Jimmy followed behind Sirius, both slightly shocked and impressed by the depth of Sirius’ depravity.

They passed by a young girl, running around frantically and sniffing. “Sugarplum? Sugarplum, where are you?”

Once they were around a corner and out of sight, Harry finally asked the question. “Okay, first, wow. And second, what?”

“I told you I’d wait for you in Hogsmeade,” Sirius said.

Harry shook his head. “No. You didn’t.”

“Oh,” Sirius frowned pulling the helmet and goggles off the blonde man’s head. “I suppose that explains why you were taking so long.” Sirius hunched down in front of the patiently sitting man. He spread two fingers and closed his eyelids, releasing a dark control spell. He looked up towards Harry and admitted. “I got a little bored waiting.”

Harry and Jimmy merely observed curiously as Sirius reversed the transfiguration on the quietly idle blonde man in the wheelchair, turning him into an adorable golden retriever puppy.

Sirius set the puppy on the ground before shrinking and pocketing the helmet, goggles, and wheelchair. Sirius picked up the puppy and looked it right in the eye. “You did real good.”

The puppy responded with several happy licks of Sirius’ face.

Harry and Jimmy followed Sirius as he walked back out from the alley.

Sirius lifted the puppy high in the air. “Anybody lose a puppy? Anyone?” Sirius spotted the crying girl down the street, but avoided making eye contact as he yelled louder. “Anyone lose a puppy?”

Harry and Jimmy saw the girl's face explode in joy. "Sugarplum!" she shouted running towards Sirius.

"Does this adorable little furball belong to you?" Sirius said squatting down and holding out the puppy.

"Oh Sugarplum," She yelled grabbing and hugging her doggie around the neck. "Where did you run off to?"

Harry saw Jimmy was as tempted to answer as he was.

"And how did you get off your leash? I double-knotted it," the girl questioned her doggie.

Jimmy had to look away and cover his mouth.

"You know," Sirius suggested. "Some puppies behave better and return when called if you don't keep them on a leash at all."

"Woof!" The puppy happily agreed.

The girl turned to Sirius in surprise having forgotten he was there. She lunged forward and hugged Sirius. "Thank you for saving Sugarplum. You're my hero." She let go of Sirius and ran the other way, holding her puppy tight.

Harry and Jimmy stood there quietly as Sirius looked inordinately pleased with himself. "It feels good to be a hero."

Jimmy snorted while Harry turned towards the Hog's Head and grumbled. "Let's get this boy liquored up."

Sirius flashed a thumbs up and hurried to lead the way. "You know Squibby McNosonofmine was the first born of Narcissa, a Black. That makes you Squibby's Lord too."

"Nice subtle name," Harry replied before whispering to Jimmy. Jimmy nodded and said, "So my brother tells me your wand whistles."

Sirius stopped and spun around. "It does *not* whistle!"

Jimmy glanced at Harry who just mouthed, 'Wait for it.'

Sirius looked at Harry in confusion. "What did you tell..."

Harry saw Sirius had paused. Harry repeated quietly, "Wait for it."

"Hang on a second," Sirius yelped in realization. "Did you say... did you say... *wand*?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "He's drunk already because a sober Sirius isn't this quick."

"Oi!" Sirius exclaimed before pausing. "I wouldn't be so drunk if you hadn't made me wait so long."

Harry glanced significantly at Sirius before turning back towards the pub at the end of the alley.

"Of course I was sober when I made the decision to wait, so never mind. Brother, huh?" Sirius asked with a grin falling in step next to Jimmy. "Did Harry give in and tell you or did he just mess up and say the wrong thing?"

"I don't mess up," Harry retorted without even turning to face them. "He had the map."

"The Marauder's Map?" Sirius excitedly asked. "I can't believe your old man let you have such an 'evil and dangerous' tool."

"Remus gave it to me," Jimmy answered before narrowing his eyes at Sirius. "How do you know about it?"

"Know about it?" Sirius repeated indignantly. "It's in my handwriting."

Jimmy stopped in sudden realization. He hurried to catch up to the Lord Blacks. "Wait, you're Padfoot? That Sirius Black?" Jimmy jumped in surprise exclaiming loudly, "You're the one who kidnapped my brother!"

Harry spun around and cast a silencing charm on Jimmy. "Okay. You're done talking until we're behind a privacy ward."

Sirius grinned at Jimmy. "And you're way off base."

Harry cast another silencing charm, this time on Sirius. "If I have to stun either of you, it's going to mean a midget detention."

Jimmy shook his head despite having no clue what that meant, only that it sounded unnatural and appeared to have genuinely frightened Sirius.

The two silenced wizards followed Harry into the bar making faces at his back the whole way.

"Hey Gin," Harry asked grabbing her attention. "You got a private room we could borrow for a bit?"

Gin Weasley quickly closed the latest issue of Witches Weekly that she had hidden inside a supply catalog. "Umm..."

Harry saw her blushing and smirked. "What were you reading?"

Gin was not about to admit that she was checking out topless photos of Sirius and Harry from when they were getting healed in front of the Wizengamot. "No private room, but you can go in back and throw up a couple wards."

"Thanks Gin," Harry said and turned towards Sirius and Jimmy. Sirius was watching Jimmy stare dreamily at the woman behind the bar.

Gin flashed a warm smile at the youngest Potter. "Hello James."

Jimmy tried to greet her back but only looked silly mouthing words underneath a silencing charm.

Harry glanced at Jimmy and translated. "He said 'Hi Gin. Your breasts look like a pair of pregnant house elves in that halter top.'"

Jimmy shook his head vigorously and gesturing his innocence.

Harry made a face of confusion at Jimmy. "She *Fawkes* like a porn star? What the hell does the Headmaster's phoenix have to do with anything?"

Gin groaned as she jerked her thumb towards the back room. "Go in the back. Maybe try and find a sense of humor while you're back there."

Jimmy took a step forward trying to silently apologize to Gin but slipped on a conveniently placed patch of ice. He flipped forward over a stool and slammed his face on the bar with a fleshy splat. Jimmy's mouth was open in a silent scream. An unmistakable *whoomph* sound accompanied Jimmy's legs and bottom half lifting off the ground as the charm on the bar top triggered.

Gin winced and thought she saw tears forming in Jimmy's eyes. Sirius who had by then countered his silencing charm, helpfully voiced, "That looked like it hurt."

Harry nodded in certain agreement. "Can we get a bag of ice and a bottle of firewhiskey?"

Gin handed them over towards Harry while Sirius helped Jimmy waddle towards the back.

Sirius canceled the silencing charm on Jimmy and put up some sturdy privacy wards. Harry entered the protected area and saw Jimmy looking at him with a weak smile. "Tonks warned me I should wear a cup around you guys."

"Catch," Harry instructed pretending to chuck the bag of ice towards Jimmy. In truth an invisible hand was carrying it and deftly dodged around Jimmy's attempt to catch the ice. It tapped Jimmy on the nose and hovered just in front of his face.

Jimmy snatched the floating bag of ice and put it on his cheek. "You're mean."

"He is," Sirius agreed, carrying back the three cleanest glasses he could locate. "Very mean."

Jimmy moved the ice from his cheek to his crotch and let out a sigh of relief. "You think maybe Gin didn't notice me hitting my face and getting nutterd?"

Harry shook his head sadly. "Kind of doubt it."

"She probably noticed your tears too," Sirius added.

Jimmy indignantly explained, "It was just the fumes in my eyes. I wasn't crying."

"Fumes," Sirius repeated in admiration. "That's a good one."

"I know," Jimmy agreed. "When I was a kid I used the old 'bug-in-the-eye' excuse but no one ever believes that one."

Sirius grumbled at the victorious grin on Harry's face. "Shut it."

Jimmy accepted the floating half-filled glass of firewhiskey and took a sip. He swallowed painfully but managed to keep himself from coughing.

"Extra obliviate juice in yours," Harry said with a wink.

Jimmy looked in his glass and challengingly smirked at Harry. He tipped the glass back and finished off the rest of it in one gulp.

Sirius and Harry saw Jimmy pale for a split second as he dropped the bag of ice. He coughed violently once and his head was surrounded by a fireball. A cloud of smoke dissipated revealing Jimmy's reddened face. The top of his head was smoldering as dark vapors trickled out his nose, ears, and mouth.

The two Lord Blacks shared a look of immense amusement.

"He's such a Potter," Sirius happily exclaimed as Jimmy was patting his hair, stamping out any fire.

"Whoa," Jimmy said as he took a step. "I feel dizzy."

"That can happen," Sirius agreed with a chuckle.

Harry's magical arms grabbed a chair and maneuvered it right behind Jimmy. "Have a seat."

Jimmy nodded gratefully and glanced at the chair behind him. He turned back to Harry and pointed. "You're not gonna move it on me, are you?"

Harry held his hands up, promising not to.

Jimmy bent his knees and sat back in the chair just as it was yanked out from under him. He fell on his bum hard enough to rattle the nearby shelves. "Oh come on," Jimmy complained wondering how he'd managed to get beat up and drunk in a span of minutes.

Sirius cheerfully displayed his wand. "He didn't move it."

"Should have guessed," Jimmy grumbled pulling the chair closer and gripping it tightly as he sat down. "I thought I heard a whistle."

"Hey," Sirius whined, showing his first wand. "This isn't the wand that whistles. This is my old one."

Harry turned to Sirius, holding back his laughter.

"I mean my wand doesn't whi-" Sirius snapped. "Oh, screw you both."

"Hey," Jimmy happily realized. "That'd be incest," he exclaimed waving his hand between Harry and himself.

"Not exactly," Harry corrected.

"But it would be gross," Sirius added.

"What do you mean?" Jimmy asked curiously.

Sirius answered without hesitation. "I know sword-fighting may look manly and all-"

"Not you," Jimmy interrupted. "Harry, what do you mean?"

Harry was slightly curious about what Sirius was going to say but answered, "Your older brother, Harry, died a long time ago. I'm Harry Potter, just a different one."

Jimmy scratched his head in confusion. "Like a cousin?"

Sirius took a drink of his firewhiskey and sighed. "This could take a while."

Gin glanced at her watch and realized it'd been a couple of hours since the three Potters and Blacks took over her store room. "Hey Moe?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm gonna step in the back. Give a shout if anyone comes in, would you?" She heard a grunt of assent from Moe as she stealthily crept down the back hall. The eerie quiet pointed towards silencing charm and she was hoping to avoid interrupting a touching family moment.

She crossed through an outer edge of wards and heard voices snickering and laughing between whispers.

"Shh! Come on, come on. Hurry up, she's coming."

Another snort of amusement was released before a different voice. "I'm almost done."

Gin whipped her head around the corner with a stern frown on her face. Her eyes widened at the sight.

Sirius was capping a magical marker and spun around smiling innocently. The illusion of innocence was broken as he moved out of the way revealing an unconscious seventh year Hogwarts student. Jimmy's head was tilted to the side while a long string of drool connected the corner of his open mouth to his shoulder. He had been stripped down to his boxers and written across his chest was a message: *I slept with Gin Weasley and all I got was one lousy memory charm (and a little itching no one can explain).*

"Please tell me that's not permanent," Gin said with a tiny sigh.

"That's not permanent," Harry and Sirius happily replied in unison.

She rolled her eyes. "You could make an effort to lie to me, you know."

"You look really pretty in that top," Harry effortlessly lied. "Not even a little skanky."

"Real nice," she grumbled.

"You've lost weight, haven't you?" Sirius added with a waggle of his finger.

"Watch it," Gin warned with a harsh poke of Sirius' shoulder. She grabbed the permanent marker from his hand. A twist of her wand and the drooling prone form of Jimmy Potter floated up and turned around, slumped over his belly on the chair. A slow drip of drool stretched to the floor while he continued to snore.

Gin tugged the waistband of his boxers down and signed her name right across his pale exposed butt cheek. She pulled his drawers back up and smiled at the Lord Blacks. "Adding a touch of authenticity."

Sirius smirked at her. "You just like making the seventh years blush."

"Such is the lonely life of a young gorgeous bartender next to a school full of hormonal teenagers," Gin forlornly explained. She started to walk back to the front of the Hog's Head and added, "If you get him inside the Hogwarts grounds, you can call for Sully. He's a house elf who takes students back to their beds safely and quietly."

Harry picked up Jimmy with a pair of invisible arms while Sirius brought down the rest of wards. The mostly naked slumbering form of the Hogwarts Head Boy missed out on the applause his exit of shame earned him while Harry and Sirius waved good night to Gin.

They paraded Jimmy down the street towards the path to Hogwarts. As soon as they crossed the primary wards, Sirius beckoned, "Sully!"

The house-elf appeared wearing two patchwork oven mitts that had been stitched into a pair of overalls. He used a dirty rag to wipe his forehead before stuffing it in his back pocket. "You called Sully?"

Sirius pointed at Jimmy. "We have-"

"Mm-hmm," Sully interrupted and agreed.

"Gin said-"

"Mm-hmm," Sully reiterated.

"He needs-"

"Mm-hmm, he sure does," Sully agreed.

"Actually," Harry jumped in. "I-"

"Really?" Sully asked looking at Harry curiously.

Harry blinked and began to wonder if this house elf was using *Legilimency*. "I was going to say-"

"Mm-hmm," Sully replied affirmatively.

"What?" Sirius asked.

"I was just," Harry stopped and non-verbally told Sully to shut up. "I was just thinking that instead of Sully taking Jimmy back up there, perhaps he should ask McGonagall to come down here."

"That's plain mean," Sirius retorted with a smile. "Do it, Sully."

"Mm-hmm," Sully agreed, snapping his fingers and disappearing with a loud pop.

Harry gently dropped Jimmy on his back with his arms and legs spread out. "Come on," Harry said with a jerk of his head. "Let's get back under our own wards and I'll tell you those things I wouldn't before."

Sirius crossed the edge of the Hogwarts' wards before Harry and apparated back to Grimmauld Place. He headed straight for the kitchen as Harry apparated in behind him. "I want some fruity pebbles and you said you'd tell me what you wish you hadn't told Albus."

Harry followed Sirius into the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water. "It's not that I wish I hadn't told him. I wanted to know if he

knew about something and he didn't, which meant I inadvertently gave him a pretty big clue. So now he's got some research to do before asking me semi-uncomfortable but inevitable questions."

Sirius took a spoonful of his late night cereal, chewed loudly, and swallowed. "Are you going to keep talking in vague generalizations or are you going to actually explain this thing you've been hiding?" Sirius took another bite of pebbles.

"Sorry," Harry replied. "Force of habit."

"Crappy habit. Understandable, but crappy."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Thing is, I asked Dumbledore if he'd heard about horcruxes."

Sirius swallowed the food in his mouth and furrowed his brow. "Those things you, Ron, and Hermione hunted?"

Harry nodded. "How much do *you* know about horcruxes?"

"Dark evil magic thing, right? Something you had to do before you could face Voldemort. Soul magic, maybe?"

"Close enough. The gist of it is that there's this little bonus ritual thing you can do when you commit a real proper cold-blooded murder. Killing of that kind damages your soul and you can take that split chunk of soul and stick it into an object."

"I'm remembering now," Sirius recalled. "You said something about how as long as one of his objects exists, then he can't be completely killed, only his body destroyed."

"Exactly," Harry agreed and attempted to subtly segue. "Now remember how I said those founders' items were pieces of a larger puzzle?"

"Sure," Sirius answered. "You said... oh god, Harry."

"Yeah?"

"You mean to tell me..."

"Yup."

"The larger puzzle is Voldemort's soul?" Sirius said incredulously.
"You're kidding, right?"

"Maybe a little," Harry carefully answered.

"How much?"

"None at all."

Sirius frowned. "How did I not see this?"

"Truthfully?"

"Yes."

"You're not that smart."

"I'm not an idiot," Sirius complained.

"I know. You're a smart guy," Harry happily offered.

"Thank you."

"Just not *that* smart."

Sirius knew he should have seen that one coming. He thought back to the locket they found and the traps around the Grindelwald zombie.
"But you said the pieces together would be more valuable..."

Harry defended, "I think to the right buyer they'd be extremely valuable. Priceless, almost."

"We can't fence the Dark Lord's soul. There's bound to be a rule about that somewhere."

"Has anyone ever tried? I mean just because no one's managed it yet," Harry answered a little too quickly.

“Hang on.”

“What? Okay. Yeah. I’m hanging on,” Harry resisted the urge to whistle. “And I’m acting perfectly normal too.”

“Hang on.”

Harry mimed zipping his mouth shut and stood there avoiding Sirius’ eyes.

Sirius was trying to pick up on the cause for Harry’s continued distress. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Alright,” Harry agreed knocking back the rest of his water and wiping his mouth on his sleeve. “Voldemort made six horcruxes because of arithmantic properties of seven. Six separate objects plus him makes seven. We’ve got Slytherin’s locket and Ravenclaw’s cube already. The diary I expect is buried in the blood-warded safe at Malfoy Manor, and Hufflepuff’s cup is in a cursed tomb in the desert. The Slytherin ring was not where it was supposed to be and we tripped some wards there, if you’ll remember.”

Sirius nodded and saw Harry was waiting on him. “I count five. What’s the sixth?”

“The sixth?” Harry admitted with a sigh. “The sixth in our old world was his familiar, an especially large snake named Nagini.”

“It’s not Nagini here?”

Harry shook his head. “According to Bella he’s never had a familiar, but I think the basilisk from the chamber now lives in the woods behind the Riddle house.”

“Comforting thought. So is it the basilisk or do we have no idea what the sixth horcrux is?”

“It’s not the basilisk,” Harry replied calmly. “I know exactly what the sixth horcrux is but I don’t know where to look for it.”

“What is it?”

Harry frowned. "You remember that hidden cursed patch of ground and tree at Godric's Hollow where nothing appears to ever grow again?"

"I knew it!" Sirius slammed his hand down happily. "I knew I died a special hero. So he made a horcrux when he killed me?"

"Ah... no," Harry answered with a shake of his head. "You fought back and through some incredible stroke of luck might have even been a threat to him. That's probably not a clean enough murder. And it's nowhere near as cold-blooded as slicing open a defenseless baby."

"He killed you to make the horcrux?" Sirius whined. "Man you get *everything*."

"Yeah, he killed me," Harry admitted. "But he killed me to turn *your* skull into a horcrux."

"My skull?" Sirius repeated as if testing out the words. "My skull is a horcrux?"

"Pretty sure, yup."

"I can just imagine him—*eurgh*," Sirius shuddered. "I feel dirty. Like I can feel him inside me all writhing around..."

"My thoughts exactly. The fact that your skull is horcruxiotic is a lot like Voldemort's having sex with you."

Sirius mentally reviewed his earlier choice of words. "Shut up."

"Are you picturing it too?"

"Stop it," Sirius ordered while banishing all mental images from his mind. He looked at Harry earnestly. "You know this isn't as bad as I first thought."

"The sex with—"

“Not that,” Sirius interrupted. “Gathering these horcruxes. I mean as founders’ objects they’re worth a hefty coin, but knowing what they also are...” Sirius shrugged. “Money, power, fame, we can turn these into just about anything we want.”

Harry was considering what Sirius said. “If word were to get out we could use Voldemort to drive the price up.”

“We’re not selling them to him,” Sirius scoffed before uncertainly adding, “Are we?”

Harry shook his head. “You know that and I know that. But our prospective buyers don’t need to know that.”

Sirius smiled brightly in agreement catching onto the potential of the situation. “You really want to hold the Ministry hostage and name our own price?”

“Not really,” Harry said with a smile in return. “But it’s definitely something to think about.”

Sirius eyes widened as he realized they had a guaranteed ‘get out of jail free’ card as well as a legitimate defense for their ‘necessary’ thieving in the unlikely event of their capture. He knew this was one set he definitely wanted completed. “You ready to tackle the Malfoys or are we going to the desert?”

Harry saw Sirius wasn’t even fazed and had already gotten back to business. “We still don’t know where the skull is or where the ring went. So desert first and then Malfoys. Teleporting fire scorpions are much easier to deal with than a dark wizard with an overdeveloped sense of self-worth.”

“Tele-what what?”

“Teleporting fire scorpions. There’s lots of fun stuff around the tomb.” He paused to scratch his chin. “Then again, the Fidelius hidden bunker was a bit different in this world.”

Sirius finished off the last bite of his now soggy cereal. He levitated the bowl to the sink where it began to magically clean itself. He saw

Harry looked relaxed. "Were you keeping all that from me because you thought I'd be upset to hear my skull is a horcrux?"

Harry shrugged wondering why he'd been so hesitant.

Sirius pushed off the edge of the counter and walked out of the kitchen. "Merlin, you're such a woman sometimes."

Jimmy let out a whimper of pain as his older sister scrubbed his chest.

"Stay still," Sarah ordered, dipping the scouring brush in the magical solution.

"You're practically grating away my skin, like a hunk of cheese," Jimmy whined. "So excuse me if I'm a little twitchy."

"Merlin, you're such a woman sometimes," Sarah muttered under her breath. "Maybe next time you'll remember not to let pretty girls write on you with permanent magical markers."

"I didn't let anyone-" Jimmy hissed in pain as his sister attacked the last line across his abdomen. "And Gin didn't write this. It was Harry and Sirius having a laugh with me."

"And that makes it better?"

"Well I wouldn't want Gin to take advantage of me while I'm unconscious." Jimmy explained. "She should do it when I'm awake. And I have a camera."

Sarah shook her head thinking both she and Jimmy inherited their perverted side from their mother. "So you'd prefer to think that two unmarried men, who live together, got you drunk and then after you passed out did something that required you to be naked." Sarah paused in her scrubbing. "Okay now I'm jealous."

Jimmy was touching his tender skin and wincing at the rawness. He looked up at the Sarah worriedly. "Have you got the hots for Harry?"

"Aww," Sarah cooed. "Is my little brother scared I'm going to steal his new boyfriend?"

"No," Jimmy snorted and sat up on the couch. "I just uh... I just..."

"Relax," Sarah assured him, dabbing a layer of healing potion over Jimmy's raw chest. "I won't let him write anything embarrassing on me in permanent magical marker."

"Oh good," Jimmy replied. "Because that's exactly what I was worried about. Are we done here?"

Sarah gave his front one last cursory evaluation. "Yeah, that should do it. If it still looks bad in a couple weeks, we can scrape again."

"Thank you," Jimmy said turning around to grab his shirt.

"Hang on," Sarah interjected. "I thought it was only on your front."

"It's not?" Jimmy asked curiously, trying to peer over his shoulder.

Sarah mentally distanced herself and focused on thinking as a healer, not a sister. She carefully tugged at the waistband of her brother's boxers and peeked down. "You say this was done by the Lord Blacks?"

"Yeah," Jimmy answered trying to catch sight of his exposed bum. "Why?"

Sarah summoned a mirror and angled it for her brother. "Because that looks like a woman's handwriting."

Jimmy paled. "Those bastards!"

Sarah lifted up her Chimaera hair brush and shook it. "Shall we take care of this one now too?"

Jimmy frowned deep in thought before reaching a conclusion. "No, I think I'll keep this one for a little while."

Sarah dropped the brush back in the solution and corked the top. "That's just creepy."

“Is that your professional opinion?” Jimmy asked holding up the mirror, checking out his signed cheek.

“Quit staring,” Sarah snapped putting away her diagnostic tools. “No potion can fix your pale chicken butt.”

“You think if I got a red magical marker and drew a heart around her name...?”

“Even creepier.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy admitted sadly. “I thought so.”

“Mum’s coming,” Sarah warned as she felt a twinge from the perimeter charm around her private quarters. “Hi Mum.”

“Have you seen your brothe-” Lily stopped when she saw her youngest hiding a mirror behind his back. “Jimmy, what are you doing?”

“Why does everyone assume I’m doing something?”

Lily was watching her son slip his shirt back on, looking for other warning signs. “Have your memories returned to you yet?”

“I wasn’t obliterated,” Jimmy pleaded. “I just... thought I was drinking really bad water and must have had too much. That’s all.”

“Really bad water, eh?” Sarah asked doubtfully.

“I worry about you,” Lily explained. “And I talked to the Headmaster and he’s worried too. So we’re just going to check you for memory charms.”

Jimmy nodded in acceptance as he tugged his shirt away from his body. Every time the cloth just gently touched his raw skin it hurt.

“Come in Headmaster,” Sarah called out after the perimeter charm alerted her.

Albus pushed the door open and smiled at the three Potters. "You know when I welcome people from the other side of the door, it's much more impressive."

Jimmy answered without thinking. "That's probably more of a statement on the people at your door."

"James, Jr.!" Lily exclaimed scandalized.

"Indeed," Albus said, his beard twitching in amusement. He tilted his head down to look at the youngest Potter over the top of his glasses. "Do you know why I wish to scan you for memory charms?"

Jimmy nodded and let his irritation shine through. "Because I made a crack about playing the obliviation game. Yes, I remember the discussion and yes, I was just joking. Honestly, there aren't any gaps in my memory. Unless you count the one after the firewhisss... I mean the bad water."

"Nice catch," Sarah jeered.

"Hey Headmaster," Jimmy said while looking at his sister. "Don't you think Sarah and Harry would make a cute couple?"

Lily looked a bit upset at the idea while Albus' face reflected many conflicting emotions. Albus carefully avoided the question and replied, "Why don't we get started on checking your mind?"

Jimmy sat down on the couch as Albus drew his wand. "Go ahead. You're not going to find anything."

"Nothing at all?" Lily asked with a grin.

"You know what I meant," Jimmy grumbled as he felt Albus flittering through his mind, testing memories without actually viewing any of them.

"So Mum," Sarah began seeing Albus and Jimmy were busy. "Have you gotten any bartenders to sign your arse in permanent magical marker lately?"

Lily blinked. "What?"

Jimmy growled at his sister. "Listen, Sarah, when you're old and out of shape, and it seems like no one is willing to talk to you, other than your seventeen pet kneazles, I just want you to know that you can count on me to tell you the truth. You suck."

"Oh dear," Albus softly added as an image flew past.

"Oops," Jimmy answered. "I didn't mean for you to see that."

Lily sighed and looked over at the child who would always be her baby. "Show me your tushy. You can pull your pants down while Albus scans you."

Jimmy wished he'd had a sickle for every time he heard that one. "Now's really not the best time."

Albus paused in his rapid fire scanning to take several long measured breaths. He smiled at Jimmy. "I shall leave it to your discretion whether you wish to turn your head and cough."

"What?" Jimmy asked in confusion.

Albus waved him off. "My humor is lost on the wizard-raised. Suffice it to say muggle-borns have some rather common horror stories."

"What?" Jimmy repeated looking towards his mother for help as the Headmaster resumed his mental scan.

"If you still have a tramp stamp let's just get it off now," Lily explained unabashedly pulling at her son's pants.

"Mum," Jimmy whined, tired of being treated like a child. "I don't have a tramp stamp! That's Sarah!"

"Jimmy!" Sarah shouted in anger.

"Oh please, honey," Lily interrupted looking towards her daughter. "Your father and I have known about your tattoo for years. You still have the materials for removing permanent magical marker?"

“Yes, mum,” Sarah agreed bringing over the solution and still moist stiff brush. She handed the covered bowl to her mother. “Why don’t I let you have the pleasure of scrubbing this one off?”

Jimmy felt Albus still rifling through his mind as he tried to slap his mother’s hands away. “I swear Mum if you don’t start treating me like an adult, I’m going to...”

“You’re going to what?” Lily asked dangerously with that ‘I brought you into this world’ tone of voice. “Find someone to write even cruder things on you?”

Albus held up his memory scan to look at the healing solution closer. “Miss Potter? What is that?”

“That’s what Madame Pomfrey told me to use,” Sarah admitted. “A rejuvenating elixir mixed with a dash of thickening potion. And she said you get best results with a Chimaera hair brush.”

Albus glanced at Jimmy with a twinkle in his eye and pity on his face. “I believe Madame Pomfrey meant a Chimaera hairbrush, not a ‘Chimaera hair’ brush.”

Sarah’s confidence faltered. “Huh?”

“Chimaera’s were created long ago and have physically evolved. They are solitary creatures with the body of a goat, the tail of a dragon, and the head of a lion, a pack animal who’s grooming issues are traditionally dealt with by other members of the pack. The Chimaera had to adapt. As a result the scales at the end of a Chimaera’s tail evolved magical teeth that can be used for grooming. They are extremely useful for being gentle and firm at the same time, strength without damaging.”

“Huh?”

Dumbledore smiled. “A scale with working magical teeth is called a Chimaera’s comb or a Chimaera’s hairbrush. That,” Dumbledore said pointing towards the solution and scrub brush, “appears to be a brush made of Chimaera hair. Which are usually very coarse and I would suspect uncomfortable.”

“Oh,” Sarah said wincing at the incredulous look her brother was giving her. “Sorry about that. I’m just an apprentice.”

“Sorry?” Jimmy squeaked. “*Sorry?*”

Lily hoped there was no lasting harm done but felt her son deserved it for not going to the proper school nurse. “What do you use a brush of Chimaera hair for?”

“Well, obviously, you could use one to remove permanent marker from skin,” Albus offered waving airily towards the indignant Head Boy. “But perhaps the most common use of one would be to sand down the calluses on Giants’ feet.”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Jimmy said closing his eyes.

“Yeah,” Sarah said with a shrug. “That brush didn’t look new either.”

Albus cheerfully took the conversation in another direction. “I am pleasantly surprised to announce that you do not have any new memory charms on you at all.”

“See?” Jimmy said shaking his finger at his mother and Headmaster. “I told you I didn’t have any mem-... wait, *new*? What do you mean new?”

Sarah was never one to pass on a chance to mock her little brother and audibly sighed. “We might as well tell him.”

Lily just raised a curious eyebrow.

“Thing is, Jimmy, until that potions accident when you were five... well, you used to be a girl.”

“Lies,” Jimmy retorted after momentarily entertaining the idea. “All lies.”

“You were best the little sister I could’ve hoped for.”

Jimmy shook his head, not rising to the bait.

Albus cleared his throat and added, "I meant 'new' in that I was only searching for signs of recent alterations, the past year or two. The older the charm, the deeper you must scan to locate it. I also couldn't help but notice there didn't appear to be any recent binding oaths or compulsion charms."

Jimmy was getting irritated. "Harry and Sirius are nice guys. They're not abusing me, obliterating me, or touching me in a way that would require a demonstration doll in court, okay?"

"So you are free to speak about anything you wish?" Albus asked giving Jimmy a significant look.

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "I am."

Albus glanced at the two female Potters before inquiring. "And is there anything you have to say?"

Jimmy caught on to what Albus was urging him to do and smiled. "Nope. Sorry, Headmaster. Nothing to say."

Albus just smiled back and nodded in understanding. His smile dropped and he let out a small sigh. "Damn."

"What was that?" Lily asked looking between the two of them curiously.

"Nothing!" Jimmy and Albus both answered immediately.

"Nothing?" Lily repeated with her hands on her hips.

Albus and Jimmy shook their heads negatively.

"Nothing to explain justifying your behavior? Nothing to add at all?"

Jimmy shook his head. "Nope. Oh!" he suddenly recalled. "Except that please, please let's not mention anything to Dad about the firewhiskey? Please?"

"You mean the 'really bad water,' don't you?" Sarah said with a grin.

"Oh yeah," Jimmy admitted. "I kinda gave up on that one, didn't I?"

Lily sat down next to her son. "Too bad, because you had me fooled."

"Really?" Jimmy asked before noticing the look his mother gave him. "Right. I'll shut up now."

"Where are we?" Sirius asked looking around in all directions.

"We're in the middle of the desert," Harry replied. "How much more do you need to know than that?"

Sirius span around in a circle. "It's just sand as far as the eye can see in every direction."

"Surprise," Harry said, mocking Sirius' wonder. He pulled out a timer and floppy hat to protect him from the sun. He put on the hat, set the timer and shoved it back in his pocket.

"How do you know which way to go?" Sirius asked. "I mean we could walk in circles and never even know it."

Harry looked up and pointed. "We need to walk for thirty minutes in that direction."

Sirius squinted towards where Harry indicated. "You're sure?"

Harry nodded and pulled out a bottle of water. He slung his large bag over his shoulder. "Positive. Now let's go."

Sirius put on his newly purchased sunglasses and fell into step with Harry. "Of course our luck would mean we have to walk towards the sun," Sirius grumbled. "How are you so sure this is the right direction? Didn't you say you'd no idea where we were apparating to?"

"Yes."

"So you don't know where we are but you know where we need to go?"

"Yes."

“Are you messing with me like that stuff about why we have to walk and can’t use brooms?”

“No.”

“So if you don’t know where we are, how do you know that’s the direction?”

“Because the tomb isn’t located in any specific location.”

“It moves?”

“Yup.”

“So how do you get to a tomb that moves?”

“There are lots of ways. It mainly depends on the magic of the tomb.”

“How about this one?”

“This one appears only if you’re lost in the Sahara desert.”

“Okay.”

“And then you have to meet a couple of other requirements. The first of which is that you must walk. No riding in a jeep, no riding on a broom, no riding on a cheetah with a catnip muzzle.”

“The magic can check that?”

“The magic can check that. And can you guess what other requirements there are?”

“You gotta walk for thirty minutes.”

“That’s correct. And I bet you can guess in what direction.”

“Okay, now you’re just fucking with me.”

Harry glanced over at Sirius but kept walking straight towards the sun.

"You're telling me this cursed tomb only appears after you get lost in the desert and then walk *towards* the sun for thirty minutes?"

"Cruel bastard, ain't he?"

"That's horrible. That's awful. Can't we just wrestle a dragon or something?" Sirius pleaded wiping the sweat from his forehead.

Harry smirked. "If you'd like, that could be arranged too."

Sirius stayed quiet as the pair kept walking towards the sun. He grabbed Harry's bottle of water and took a drink. He tried to hand it back.

"Keep it," Harry said with his eyes focused forward. "I've got more."

Sirius took another drink of water and wondered if this was the longest half hour of his life. "You said there are traps?"

Harry nodded. "Many. You got your gillyweed?"

Sirius looked inside his cloak. "Check."

"Your antidotes and anti-venom pack?"

"Check."

"Your crucifixes and bibles?"

"Check."

"Exactly two and a quarter kilograms of petroleum jelly?"

"Check."

"How many flame-freezing charms have you stored up to trigger wandlessly?"

"You said I'd need at least five. So I layered in twenty, two at a time."

"Excellent. What do you do when you hear the singing?"

“Cover my ears.”

“When you see the naked women? Or possibly poodles?”

“Cover my eyes.”

“When you cross the underground river filled with candiru?”

Sirius angrily snarled. “I’m going to crispy fry every last one of those motherfuckers.”

Harry shrugged. “I was looking for pucker and cover but that works.”

A loud beeping began to emanate from Harry’s pocket. He pulled out the timer and turned it off. “Okay now, you’re going to begin to feel tension inside of you building. Your magic is going to want you to react. Do not cast any magic at all. Just keep walking.”

Sirius winced as his magic began to itch.

“Eventually your magic is going to hit a point and react on its own. When that happens, everything will go black and you’re gonna fall. You’ve got about two seconds to cast a cushioning charm, repelling charm, something, or else you’re gonna get skewered on bone spikes. Move forward on the ground until you reach a fork in the road and wait. We’ll meet up there.”

“Harry,” Sirius hissed out through clenched teeth.

“Don’t cast anything, Padfoot. And don’t transform either. No magic!”

“Harry, I thought you should know... I mean, I...”

Harry winced as he kept walking, fighting his own impulse to veer from this path. “Waited until the last moment?”

“Well maybe if you’d let me finish I could-”

“Don’t blame this on me. If it was important enough to mention, you should have said something earlier.”

“You’re unbelievable. This conversation could have been over five times already but you just can’t let it go.”

“Just say what you wanted to, you ignorant buttug-”

Then the sand exploded into darkness and swallowed them whole.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Oh my freakin' head," Sirius muttered as he slowly regained consciousness.

"Sirius?" Harry asked from the foot of his godfather's hospital bed. "Can you hear me?"

"Oh my freakin' ears," Sirius grumbled in discomfort.

"Too loud?" Harry asked softer.

Sirius blearily looked towards Harry's voice. "Oh my freakin' eyes."

"Too bright?"

"No, I just looked at your face."

Healer Armstrong had quickly responded to the summons and entered the private room at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. "I see my most deviant patient of the day is finally awake."

"We might need more Skele-gro," Harry grunted. "I think Sirius here lost his funny bone too."

"Oh my freakin' god," Sirius groaned. "That was horrible."

Healer Armstrong glanced at Harry. "I'm inclined to agree with the patient. His sense of humor seems to be functioning quite well." He didn't give Harry a chance to pout, before addressing Sirius. "How are you feeling?"

Unable to resist, Sirius happily replied, "With my fingers for the most part."

"Perhaps I spoke too soon," Healer Armstrong frowned. "We'll have to have that funny bone looked at." His expression quickly turned professional. "Aches and soreness are expected but should be mild. Are you in any pain?"

“Sore, no sharp or specific pain,” Sirius said tilting his head. “But I can’t move my body at all. What happened?”

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Healer Armstrong asked, triggering the memories to come to the fore of Sirius’ consciousness.

“Oh sweet Merlin,” Sirius’ eyes widened remembering their retrieval of the horcrux. “I-*mmph*.”

Sirius’ words were muffled as Harry had slapped a hand over Sirius’ mouth. “He remembers,” Harry assured the healer before berating his godfather. “Sirius, don’t say anything stupid. Hippocratic oath protections and all.” Harry turned to the healer and innocently added, “Not that I would ever modify anyone’s memory without consent or going through the proper Ministry approved procedure.”

“Right,” Healer Armstrong replied in disbelief.

“Hello?” Sirius loudly interrupted. “Unable to move? Anyone? Anyone?”

“Your legs were severely damaged, Lord Black,” the healer explained. “The injuries were serious enough that we were forced to vanish all the bones from your pelvis down and grow them back. The tissue damage varied-”

“Oh god, oh god,” Sirius started to panic.

“Your penis is fine,” Harry exasperatedly assured him.

Sirius let out a long breath, before a thought crossed his mind. “Wait!”

“Testiculars too.”

Sirius sighed in relaxation. “Phew.”

Healer Armstrong continued, “The point being that you have to be briefed on your situation before you unknowingly put too much stress on the extremely brittle bones. I will remove the paralysis as long as you don’t get out of your bed or do anything that will jeopardize your

healing. Sitting up, leaning over, and only the smallest pieces of magic are acceptable but nothing to disturb your legs. Nothing at all.”

“I got it. Please, remove the paralysis,” Sirius asked. “I need to know that he’s okay.”

The healer touched his wand to the hospital bed and Sirius’ arms sprung free. His upper torso pitched forward as his hand wriggled underneath his hospital gown and headed straight for his crotch. “One of those, one-two... and a half of those. Okay we’re good.”

“Could you stop touching there?” Harry said snapping Sirius back to reality, after it appeared that the older Lord Black forgot others were in the room.

“Before I forget,” Sirius said turning towards Harry. “I figured out how we’re going to break into-*mmph*.”

“He must be delirious still,” Harry said, halfway smothering his godfather while smiling at the healer. “Could you give us a few minutes?”

Healer Armstrong closed up the folder he was noting his observations in. “Actually, my day ended a few minutes ago. Madame Archer will be here to assist you overnight should you need it. When I return tomorrow morning Lord Black should be ready to try standing again.” He turned to Sirius and addressed him sternly. “You are not to attempt putting any weight on your legs. Understood?”

“*Mmmph-mmph*,” Sirius said with a nod, in spite of Harry’s hand.

“You have my emergency buzzer,” Healer Armstrong nodded goodbye to the Lord Blacks.

Harry removed his hand and tossed up some extra privacy wards. “It’s safe to talk.”

Sirius huffed. “So you’re really, *really* sure that left is the way to go?”

"It was the way to go. We got the horcrux and we got out. You were the idiot," Harry scolded while wiping the spittle off his licked hand. "And didn't you have something to say?"

"Huh?"

Harry tried repeating Sirius' own words. "Before you forget, you figured out...?"

Sirius blinked. "Huh?"

Harry sat down in the squeaky chair facing Sirius' bed. He assumed Sirius would remember what he meant to say if it was important enough. "Do you not recall when I asked at the start if you had exactly two and a quarter kilograms of petroleum jelly?"

"Yeah," Sirius admitted. "But I figured a quarter is just a rough estimate. It's not an exact amount."

"Why do you think I used the word *exactly*?"

"You didn't say '*exactly* exactly.' You just said '*exactly*.' Like it can't be two or two and a half, it's gotta be right around two and a quarter. Roughly."

"Padfoot."

"Maybe if you'd been a little clearer," Sirius gave up his argument when he saw Harry was unconvinced. "So the thing is...?"

"In the place," Harry assured him. "With the other two things."

"Three down," Sirius summarized. "Three to go."

Harry gave in to his curiosity and asked the question that had been bothering him. "So what did you use the petroleum jelly for? Because I know I gave you the right amount."

Sirius snickered in memory. "I coated the entire floor of Moony's bathroom with it while he was in the shower. He grabbed his towel and stepped out of the tub." Sirius was outright laughing by now.

“Just slipping and sliding everywhere, arms flailing. He even bruised his tailbone.”

Harry shook his head and reminded, “You’ve had to *regrow* your tailbone, along with dozens of others.”

Sirius paused and broke out a smile. “Still worth it.”

“You’re an idiot,” Harry retorted. “And you took some of my petroleum jelly trying to even yours out. You could’ve killed me!”

“Yeah,” Sirius wiggled as he sat up. “How’d you get us out?”

“I snagged enough of your petroleum jelly to get me to exactly two and a quarter kilograms and then I just powered us the hell out of there. That thing was going to kill you, Sirius.”

Sirius winced at the memory. “How was I supposed to know that a freakin’ Giant could uproot a tree and start casting with it?”

Harry sighed. “You know we can’t tell anyone where we really were.”

Sirius nodded. “I know.”

“I had to make up a story for the hospital records.”

“Oh no.”

Harry smiled.

“What did you tell them?”

Harry suppressed his delight and calmly answered, “I merely told them you were experimenting with the effects of love potions on bludgers. That’s why I didn’t check up on all the pounding sounds until after three hours had passed and your legs looked like a couple of dragon hairballs.”

“Vivid visual,” Sirius commented, glancing down at his heavily wrapped legs.

"You've been out for four days," Harry explained and pointed towards the counter by the sink. "You got some get well soon cards."

"Four days?" Sirius questioned before remembering they had an appointment. "Jimmy?"

"I met with him," Harry answered.

"And?"

Harry shrugged. "And it went exactly like he said. Dumbledore came down, checked him for memory charms, and found nothing."

"So did you...?"

Harry nodded a little reluctantly. "I obliviated him. There was plenty of residue from Dumbledore's scan to mask the charm."

"Jimmy's right," Sirius added. "Snivellus would've had no qualms about plucking it from his head at any time."

"I know. And with the brotherhood charm, I'll more than likely keep Albus from ever realizing why I don't want him discussing things with Jimmy."

"It's only a few more months until he graduates anyway."

Harry nodded. "But even then, we'll need to decide whether to remove the memory charm or leave it there."

"You think you could let it stay?" Sirius asked. "Because you're acting like some John stole your whoring money."

"I am not," Harry grumbled. "But just for that, I'm going to have sex tonight while you can't even move from your hospital bed."

"You mind doing it in here?" Sirius asked feeling bored with his confinement already.

"Those boundaries that we talked about?"

"Too far?"

Harry smiled mirthlessly. "Yeah."

"Oh that reminds me!" Sirius exclaimed. "I remember what I meant to say earlier. I figured out how we're going to break into Malfoy Manor."

Harry sat up, his attention drawn. "Really?"

"My subconscious has had four days to itself. And I'm brilliant."

"Really?" Harry asked again with more than a touch of doubt.

"It's simple," Sirius grinned. "All we have to do is get Lucius to key me into the wards. And then I can bring them down enough from the inside for you to come play too."

"That's all, huh?" Harry asked. "Just get Lucius to key you into the wards?"

Sirius looked at Harry. "You don't think I could bring them down from the inside?"

"That's not the part I'm skeptical of," Harry replied. "I'm more wondering just how you plan to get Lucius to key you in."

"I'm still ironing out some of the details," Sirius admitted. "You're going to need to be in top acting form and I need to double-check some facts on the history of house elves."

"What?" Harry asked unprepared for that.

"Bellatrix could help in a small role," Sirius mused to himself out loud. "And it'd be nice if Lucius is still clueless of all things American."

Harry couldn't keep up with the random hints Sirius was dropping. "You're not going to give me any details, are you?"

Sirius shook his head. "Not yet. You need to work on how to get into the safe. I'll get us in the door."

"You want me to have the nurse knock you out for a few days? See if your subconscious has any more bright ideas."

“Very funny,” Sirius retorted. “You’re just jealous of my brilliant subconscious. Which is understandable considering your subconscious is pouting like woman from having to oblivate your semi-brother. You know come to think of it, you’ve been a lot more willing to accept Jimmy as a little brother than you have his parents as anything.”

“No kidding. And just why do you think that is?” Harry retorted staring intently at Sirius.

“Don’t kill the messenger,” Sirius said holding his hands up in supplication. “I’m just making an innocent observation.”

“Speaking of killing the messenger,” Harry chuckled weakly. “You know because of your legs healing, you can’t have sex for at least three to four weeks.”

A horrible, gut-wrenching sound echoed throughout the entire sixth floor of St. Mungo’s.

Remus looked down at his shopping list again wondering if he was deciphering the scribbles correctly. “Three tubes of peppermint toothpaste? Milk chocolate or semi-sweet, not dark.” He considered if he should read anything into the three exclamation points after ‘not dark’ before finally translating the last item on the list. “White bread crusts and wheat bread middles?”

Remus turned his cart down the aisle for hair care products and almost didn’t believe his eyes. “James?”

James Potter, Assistant Director of the DMLE, had just set a bottle of muggle hair conditioner into his handheld shopping basket when he looked up. “Remus? What are you doing here?”

Remus sensed his friend’s nervousness. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“I asked first.”

Remus held up his two-sided list. “I was doing some shopping.”

"I thought you shopped at the market just a few blocks from your place?" James asked curiously while wondering if Remus came alone.

"I do, but they were shut down tonight to refinish the floor." Remus looked into James' basket and saw several fruity smelling conditioners, body wash, and bath salts. "I thought Nappy did most of your shopping."

"She does," James quickly replied. "But obviously she can't go to certain types of stores."

Remus pushed his cart closer to his friend and frowned, jumping to the only conclusion he could imagine. "Be honest with me. Are you cheating on Lily?"

James' eyes nearly bugged out of his head. "Heavens, no! Remus, how could you even think such a thing?"

"Oh good," Remus admitted in relief. "I thought it sounded crazy."

"Almost insultingly so," James agreed, standing up a little straighter.

"Well what am I supposed to think?" Remus defended. "You're nervous, scared, and buying all sorts of woman products."

"They're not woman products," James snapped back. "Men use," he pulled out a small pouch and read, "tangerine rain bath crystals," he looked back up at Remus, "just as much as women do."

Remus was fighting a smile. "James?"

"Alright," James admitted. "That was bad example I grabbed there but it's not all girly."

Remus reached into James' shopping basket and read the label. "Apple blossom with extra volume."

"Not so loud," James scolded.

Remus smiled as his friend held his shopping basket protectively behind him.

“What?” James asked under the uncomfortable stare.

“Are you going to explain this to me,” Remus asked handing him back the apple blossom conditioner. “Or do you just want me to guess when I tell it to *everyone* we’ve ever met, ever?”

“You’ve changed,” James earnestly replied, before recognizing the danger of his situation. “And you can’t tell anyone about this.”

“I haven’t changed that much,” Remus argued. “And you know I won’t say anything if it’s that important to you.”

“You uncover something I’m obviously trying to hide and immediately turn to jokes and blackmail?” James replied. “No, you’ve changed and we both know why.”

“You do?” Remus asked uncertainly.

James nodded. “Tonks is an adult now, so if you feel the need to act like a kid again because of your immature new best friends,” James trailed off and shrugged. “I can think of much worse ways to have a mid-life crisis.”

“Mid-life crisis?” Remus repeated indignantly. “You gotta be... Okay, first? Sirius and Harry aren’t my new best friends. They’re not the ones who got me through school and spend every full moon with me. I like them and trust them, but they know who my best friend is.” Remus paused before admitting, “Well okay maybe Sirius would pout and try to argue with me, but Harry would understand better than anyone.”

James made a pained face as if he wanted to frown harshly but something was holding him back.

“Listen,” Remus said, feeling this conversation was long overdue. “Forget everything you know about Sirius and Harry and think like an auror. Here are two people that Tonks and I know well and trust implicitly. Two people your Uncle Peter likes well enough, Dumbledore trusts enough to have a brotherhood charm with Harry, I know Lily likes them, and your son practically worships them.”

“Believe me, I know.”

“I’ll admit they’re not exactly the best role models,” Remus conceded in what James considered the understatement of the year. “And while they may go about it in somewhat of an unconventional way, they are doing good things. I mean they’re not Death Eaters. Hell, they’ve caught a few for you and they kicked the Voldemort’s arse. They’re even pushing muggle-friendly politics from a seat that’s traditionally been one of the staunchest supporters of pureblood supremacy.”

“I know all this,” James tiredly agreed. “Lily gave me a rather similar lecture, though hers featured less profanity.”

“Oh,” Remus wisely commented. “Well okay.”

“It just feels like everyone I know is changing and it’s their fault.”

Remus stayed quiet, recognizing some truth in James’ words. “I think everyone is changing less than you realize. But I also think change can be good.”

“Now you sound exactly like my wife,” James grumbled. “It’s her fault I’m here.”

“You’re going to try and convince me this stuff is for her? A second ago it was manly.”

James shook his head negatively. He looked both ways down the aisle and quietly explained. “It’s her fault because she got into one of her moods and ordered me to take an hour long bath to relieve some of the stress that was ‘obviously addling my brain.’ It’s not like I wanted to take a bath but...”

“Relaxing?” Remus asked.

James carefully muffled a snort. “I’m here in the middle of the night buying this junk, aren’t I?”

“Good point,” Remus agreed holding up his own list.

James didn't recognize the handwriting on the list and looked closer at Remus' cart. "What do you need five jars of pickles and six jars of peanut butter for?"

"Actually five jars of each go together," Remus explained with a grimace. "The sixth is because I obviously need my own jar of peanut butter."

James blinked. "Huh?"

Remus realized this talk was also overdue but he was far more hesitant to have it. "You remember how I said I haven't changed that much?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I'm going to be a dad again soon."

"What?" James gasped. "You're going to be a dad! Remus, I didn't even know you were dating."

"Yeah," Remus winced. "We've only been on a couple of dates and we really can't go anywhere other than the occasional muggle place."

"Muggle?" James repeated. "Did you knock up a muggle? And wait, what about your-?"

"Don't worry," Remus interrupted. "It's going to be a girl. No chance of the curse getting passed on. And no, I wouldn't exactly call her a muggle."

"What would you call her?" James asked curiously.

Remus clenched his eyes shut as he heard a female voice approach him from behind.

"Honey?" Bellatrix called out recognizing Remus' back, unable to see who he was talking to. "Make sure you get creamy and chunky peanut butter. Oh and honey too."

Remus opened his eyes to see the shock on James' face. James just tilted to the side and saw Bellatrix Black come to an abrupt halt.

"Death Eater," James muttered right as Remus answered, "Yes dear."

Bellatrix heard both of them and gulped audibly. "Protect our baby!" she shouted wrapping her arms around her abdomen. She turned around and ran full speed the other way.

Neither James nor Remus made any move as Bellatrix sprinted away and around the edge of the aisle.

James looked at Remus. "Does she-?"

"She thinks you're chasing her," Remus said with a nod.

James still wasn't sure what to make of this but he remembered how Lily acted every time she was pregnant. "Do you need to-?"

"I'd rather not right now," Remus admitted.

James couldn't help but to snigger at his best friend.

"I'm glad I amuse you."

"I'm sorry, Remus," James apologized. He was still in shock that Remus was going to have a baby with Bellatrix Black. "So did you just wake up one morning and say, 'Today, I think I want eggs, toast, and to have a baby with a Death Eater. Maybe some bacon too.'"

Remus noticed James had been subtly changing as well. He grinned as he realized reverting would be a more accurate description. "I kind of got suckered into it," Remus took a moment to ponder his accidental double entendre. "And she's not a Death Eater. In fact, this is why she left them. She wanted to have a child and be free of the Dark Lord's influence."

"With you?" James added the most surprising part.

Remus shrugged. "She swore loyalty to Harry and Sirius and wants them to recognize her child as a Black. They weren't going to knock her up so they tricked me into volunteering."

James stood up straighter, assuming a firmer stance. "Did they force you? Dose you somehow?"

"James," Remus said with a frown.

"Did they?"

"Prongs," Remus meaningfully answered.

James knew Remus never used his old nickname lightly and paused. He sighed. "You've been calling me that quite a bit lately."

"You've deserved it quite a bit lately," Remus replied. He saw his friend was showing genuine concern. "No, of course they didn't dose me or force me. They just... have you *seen* Bellatrix lately?"

James whistled softly and nodded. "Understood. Well, not really, but if it makes sense to you."

"I don't know what I'm doing," Remus admitted with a shrug. "But I'm kind of happy doing it."

"That part I do understand," James said slapping his friend on the shoulder. "So she's pregnant? I thought her breasts looked fuller than usual."

"Tell me about it," Remus agreed with an appreciative nod. "The wolf in me adores the birthing hips."

"Okay," James replied, thinking the conversation just got weird.

"Bellatrix tells me I've started purring in my sleep."

"I'm officially uncomfortable now," James stated calmly.

"Right," Remus grinned weakly and pointed down the aisle. "I should be..."

“Yeah,” James agreed and pointed the other way. “I need to...”

“Good luck with your...” Remus paused unsure how to finish other than with “bath?”

James just waved at Remus as he walked away the other direction.

“Alright,” Remus said turning back to his list. “Marshmallows and... snausages? God dammit Sirius what have you been doing to that poor woman?”

“Well,” Ginny drew out the word as she wiggled happily in place. “Yes, ghosts can go through the motions of eating, but it doesn’t taste right.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked uncomfortably holding the ghost onto his lap.

“That sounds like another question,” Ginny said angling her cheek up towards Harry.

Harry maintained his forced smile and leaned forward to kiss Ginny on the cheek.

Ginny giggled in happiness at the small smooch. “It tastes bad. Just unpleasant. But foods more closely related to death and the macabre, like maggots, have a kick. You won’t get full or eat for nourishment, but the crunching and wiggling can make for a pleasurable experience.”

Harry felt ill at the idea.

“Think of it as exercise for your jaw because consumption simply isn’t a part of ghost life,” Ginny continued.

“But how do you even chew up the maggots when you can’t consciously touch solid objects?”

Ginny wiggled her bum on Harry’s lap again. “That’s a pretty complicated question. I figure that one’s worth at least a shag.”

“No,” Harry said, reluctantly entering another negotiation.

“Enough over the clothes action to bring me to a-”

“No,” Harry interrupted.

“Hmm,” Ginny harrumphed. “Fine two kisses and a foot rub. Final offer.”

Harry weighed the offer in his head. “Deal.”

Ginny closed her eyes, and ever so slightly puckered her lips towards Harry.

Harry ducked left and then right placing chaste kisses on each cheek. “Two kisses,” he happily announced lifting Ginny up and depositing her halfway down the couch. Her ghostly feet remained in his lap and he pulled her shoes off. “Start talking.”

She held a frown for a split second before grinning brightly in happiness at the thought of her soul mate flirting so playfully. “Ooh,” she murmured as Harry started to massage her feet.

Harry frowned as a lump formed in the back of his throat. “Chewing solid objects?”

“Maggots, right,” Ginny recalled. “Yeah, the thing about solid objects is that most can’t touch them, but there are all kinds of exceptions.”

Harry nodded, keeping his head turned so he wouldn’t have to watch his shameful hands.

“Some ghosts’ reasons for staying behind can include specific items,” Ginny explained as her ghostly body hummed in contentment. “Probably the most common are young children with a favorite toy or opening and closing doors.”

“Muggleborns who didn’t know magic was real and haunt their old homes,” Harry offered. “And since their muggle families can’t see ghosts...”

“Exactly,” Ginny agreed. “Other exceptions are occasionally acquired with age. Like Myrtle can touch almost anything in her bathroom now but I don’t think any of the other Hogwarts ghosts have strong affinities.”

“I’d wondered why she splashed in her toilet but didn’t splash me in the bath,” Harry commented.

“Excuse me,” Ginny warned dangerously crossing her arms. She was allowing Harry some leeway while he was still acclimating to their relationship, but she was not going to allow another ghost in her territory.

“It was a long time ago,” Harry assured her tiredly. “You were a third year. She helped me with the second task of the tournament.”

“Doesn’t mean you have to keep talking about it,” Ginny pouted.

“Sorry.”

“Kiss?”

“No,” Harry said. “I’m still rubbing your feet because there are more exceptions.”

Ginny frowned for a second and burst into another brilliant smile. “Right. The other exceptions are dependent on objects more than the ghosts. Some times of the year or locations like graveyards can factor in. Some artifacts and specific things, like the creepy crawlies chex mix, can be touched. Sometimes it takes a large gathering of ghosts to push the collective afterlife close enough to interact with the living world. And then there are the magics that can affect ghosts. Family manors can be protected by their own legacy this way, traps that ghosts can trigger, magical sealings and defenses.”

“I don’t suppose you know any of those spells?”

“That’s another question,” Ginny happily answered sticking her cheek out.

Harry pulled her towards him and sighed as he kissed her quickly.

Ginny giggled and grabbed Harry in a hug.

He considered not allowing her to feel his physical form, but knew he had to play nice. With an awkward pat, he hugged her back.

Ginny squeezed him tighter and replied. "Nope. I don't know any of the spells."

Harry's spirits deflated and he let Ginny fall through his body.

"Sweetie," Ginny begged as her translucent body fell into the couch.

Harry stood to leave the room. "You've used me enough for today."

Ginny floated up looking hopeful and innocent. "Do you feel dirty? Do you, do you need a shower?"

Harry grimaced at the average Gryffindor amount of subtlety. He looked over at the ghost who was deftly avoiding his eyes. "Yeah, okay," Harry conceded without care. "But you're scrubbing my back."

A ghostly squeal was heard as Ginny did a loop in the air and zoomed down the hall towards Harry's bathroom.

Tonks heard the shower running and snuck into Harry's bathroom. She saw Ginny unconsciously rubbing a circle into Harry's back with her gaze firmly fixed on his freakishly pale bum. Tonks' entrance to the bathroom had gone unnoticed and she was feeling mischievous.

The sound of the sliding glass door opening alerted Harry and Ginny to the newcomer.

They stared in surprise as a completely nude, shy Ginny Weasley clasped her hands together, trying to cover her embarrassment. A blush covered her body as she met both the ghost's and young man's eyes. A soft, gentle voice dared to ask, "Mind if I join you?"

Harry wasn't quite sure how to respond but didn't have to as Ginny's gasping breaths made him look over his shoulder.

Ginny stared at the very real and solid human form of her own body. Dozens of her dreams and fantasies were within her grasp. She was hyperventilating happily, gasping as the smile on her face threatened to split her face in half.

Tonks held on tight to her metamorphmagus form but worriedly took a step towards the ghost. "Ginny?"

Ginny just nodded stupidly, breathing faster, and more frantically as her smile started to fade. She couldn't control herself as her eyes rolled up into her head, and the ghost collapsed in a dead faint.

"Huh," Tonks said looking down at the ghost lying on the floor.

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

"You don't think I killed her, did I?" Tonks said, shifting herself back to a blue-haired version of her base form.

"I'm not that lucky," Harry said, rolling the ghost over to the back of the large shower.

Tonks let the water cascade down her naked body, running her hands through her hair, slicking it back and out of her eyes. She flashed a predatory grin at Harry. "Let's see about getting you luckier then."

"Okay," Harry helplessly agreed. "But it could take a lot of work."

"Harry," Tonks said pulling him closer. "I know you've never had a real job--"

"Oi!"

"-but that's really not a lot of work."

"I suppose not," Harry grumbled to himself. "If your part is to lay there like a dead fish."

Tonks was about retort when a pair of invisible hands grabbed her ankles, flipped her upside-down, and held her in place, floating in the gentle shower stream.

Harry spun Tonks slowly in place, admiring her body and waiting for her to proclaim his greatness.

The blood was rushing to her head, but she still maintained a straight face as she licked her lips and asked, "Got any fish food?"

Harry was still toweling his hair dry when he spotted a pouting Sirius. Knowing exactly what was bothering his godfather, Harry felt he had a duty. "Sex, sex, sex. It's like even when I'm not really in the mood, I figure why not? Let's have some more sex."

Sirius just growled and turned the volume up a notch on the telly.

"Oh I'm sorry, Sirius," Harry said without a drop of sincerity. "How inconsiderate of me. Don't worry about it though. These last two weeks have flown by, I'm sure."

"It's only been eleven days, you," Sirius resisted the urge to use the term wanker. "You orphan."

Harry suppressed his glee. "Really? *Eleven*? So you're not even halfway done yet?"

Sirius took out his frustration on the remote and pushed really hard changing the channel.

"Whenever they remove your ban, if you need someone to catch you up on the new rules and the rules that have changed, you just let me know."

Sirius just ignored Harry.

"So I had sex this morning," Harry began.

"That's it," Sirius snapped, digging his hand into his pocket. "I told myself I wouldn't do this, but you brought this on yourself." Sirius

thrust his hand out with a marble held between his thumb and forefinger. "Bwah!"

Harry hadn't moved but looked at the marble curiously.

"Bwah!" Sirius tried again wiggling the marble. "Bwah?"

Harry sounded like a babysitter that just caught her charge with his hand in the cookie jar. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing?" Sirius said, looking at his apparently faulty marble. "I thought marbles were your greatest fear?"

Harry blinked. "What?"

"I saw that boggart nest attack you." Sirius saw the confusion on Harry's face. "In the tomb? About three rooms before we got to the cup?"

Harry chuckled. "Those weren't marbles, Sirius."

"Well they weren't dementors either," Sirius retorted. "Which is what our old Moony said your boggart turned into."

"It used to turn into a dementor," Harry explained. "But that was more a fear of fear than a fear of the creatures. After I took Voldemort down, I pretty much conquered that one. Now I can't stand the idea of not having any control in my own life."

Sirius thought back to what he'd mistakenly assumed were marbles. "Those were *Imperius* bubbles?"

"No," Harry replied in confusion. "Those were prophecy spheres. What the hell is an *Imperius* bubble? And you really thought I was afraid of marbles?"

Sirius shrugged. "Because prophecy spheres is that much better?"

Harry knew he didn't have any defense for that one. "Hey! You were trying to torture me with my worst fear. You're a mean bastard."

Sirius waved Harry off. "I knew you weren't scared of marbles."

"No, you didn't."

"Po-tay-toe, po-tah-toe," Sirius said redirecting the conversation. "So have you just been stepping up your game to rub it in my face?"

"I haven't been stepping up-"

"Nine different girls in eleven days is a significant increase in production for you," Sirius retorted. "Assuming this morning's is another new one."

Tonks was towel drying her own hair and stuck her head in the room. "Am I interrupting?"

"Okay, not a new one," Sirius corrected, addressing Harry. "Still, eight's pretty high."

"Yeah," Harry said waving Tonks over. "About that..."

Sirius let his remote control arm drop and looked at Harry and Tonks curiously.

"Just show him," Harry urged Tonks. "It'll be easier."

Tonks' form shifted into a face and body that Sirius recognized from the day before. She morphed her way through a dozen different forms, half of which Sirius had seen in just the past eleven days.

"No different girls," Harry told him. "It's always been Tonks."

Sirius frowned as Tonks pressed up next to Harry. "But why would you hide that from... oh."

"We're in love," Tonks said with a helpless shrug.

"Yup, love," Harry said especially enthusiastically.

"But... I mean..." Sirius was clearly struggling to deal with this revelation. His face looked like he was about to burst into unhappy tears. "That's great."

Harry visibly relaxed. "I'm so glad you think so. Because I asked Tonks to marry me, and she said yes!"

Sirius whimpered as if he'd been struck.

Harry swung an arm over Tonks' shoulder, pulling her closer. "So much love."

Sirius looked away and finally seemed to accept the situation. "Harry? You know I only care about your happiness, right?"

Tonks mumbled out the corner of her mouth. "There was a 'hap' in there, right?"

Harry ignored Tonks and decided to humor Sirius. "I'll say yes."

"And you know I'd never," Sirius emphatically repeated, "*never* interfere in your life or tell you how to live, right?"

Harry suspected the truth was not the answer to use here. "Right."

"I forbid this," Sirius said waving his hands wildly at Tonks and Harry. "It's not allowed. Meaningless sex is fine. But sex with meaning? That's, that's, *that's not sex at all*. It's just... dirty."

"God dammit," Tonks swore pushing away from Harry. She turned to leave the room, cursing Sirius' existence. "One day? You couldn't fake it for one day? This is Harry's happiness."

Sirius was immensely confused. "Huh?"

Harry grinned victoriously as Tonks stalked away. "She thought you'd be able to hold your tongue for at least a day. I bet we wouldn't even finish the conversation. You didn't even give me a chance to ask you to be my Best Man."

"So," Sirius strove for clarification. "So you're not...?"

"In love? Getting married?" Harry repeated with a scoff. "More gullible than the first year Gryffindor Seamus convinced was dating Hermione and that he'd been obliviated by Snape?"

“So the last few days haven’t been just Tonks?”

“Eight different, Sirius,” Harry assured. “And knowing it would annoy you actually made the sex a little bit better. Tonks is just a very cool girl with apparently too much faith in you.”

Sirius snickered at how pissed Tonks had been when she left the room. “What did you bet?”

“Next three meals at Grimmauld Place, she’s eating on the floor,” Harry explained. “Food in a food bowl, drink in a water bowl, and absolutely no hands or magic at all.”

Sirius looked at Harry in disappointment. “You don’t bet sexual favors?”

Harry shook his head. “Embarrassment causes more lasting damage.”

“True enough,” Sirius agreed. “Speaking of lasting damage, Bellatrix sent the letter to Narcissa. You think you’re going to be able to handle this?”

Harry nodded. “No sweat. I’ve got my eyes on the prize. I can hold my tongue and play a role. The only real danger would be an accidental magic killing curse.”

Sirius pursed his lips in thought. “Could that happen?”

Harry shrugged. “I doubt it. But he is *really* annoying.”

“Annoying? He’s only annoying if you’re lucky,” Sirius commiserated.

Harry grinned. “I’ve been working on that actually.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t believe we’ve met,” Lucius said, dripping with faux sincerity.

“I’m Benjamin Franklin, Lord Malfoy,” the severely hunched over and heavily disguised Harry said extending his hand.

“Salutations, Mr. Franklin,” Lucius replied shaking hands with a distasteful look on his face.

“Are you familiar with the unfortunate situation that has led me to you, Lord Malfoy?”

Lucius shook his head, watching the aged wizard in front of him for signs of treachery.

“Brighton,” Harry exclaimed with a rasping cough. “The elf that has served my family since before I was born is perilously close to earning his permanent retirement, if you will.”

Lucius looked at the perfectly stoic and proud standing elf behind Harry. “It looks healthy.”

“That’s not Brighton,” Harry explained. “That’s Kreacher. I asked Brighton to pick and train his successor. Kreacher here was purchased a couple weeks ago from the Lords Black. Are you familiar with them?”

Lucius’ lips curled in disgust. “A pair of more worthless people would be hard to find.”

Harry broke into an exaggerated and guttural laugh. “You won’t hear any argument from me. They felt it was wrong owning the creatures and wanted to get rid of theirs. Even made me swear not to beat the little fucker. I should have suspected something with the price so low, but as it turns out, Kreacher here is hereditary bound to the Black line.”

“I fail to see why you’re wasting my time,” Lucius said in mild irritation.

“I have no use for an elf born and bred for another family. His spawn will also be inclined to serve the Blacks. The Lords Black refused to take him back. Bellatrix Black was difficult to locate, but she replied negatively to my letter. She appears to only take orders from her Lords, but she did suggest her sister was married to you Lord Malfoy, a family name I knew well.”

“You’re trying to sell me your elf?” Lucius clarified. “I have one already and am not inclined to give to charity that dirties my front door.”

“I understand, Lord Malfoy, I really do,” Harry said. “And I’m not looking to sell you Kreacher. I was hoping to trade Kreacher for another able house elf as my family still needs an elf.”

“Why should I do this favor for you?” Lucius inquired. “My current elf is a faithful and able servant.”

Harry had a strong feeling that he doubted that but kept piling it on. “Kreacher here is most useful to those of Black descent. If you and I cannot reach an accord, then I’m requesting your permission to take this offer to your heir, Draco. I always approach the Lord first, and given who the elf’s previous owners were, perhaps this elf is of... *special* value to you.”

Lucius blinked, only then realizing the elf may very well contain the secrets of the Lord Blacks.

“I care not for its past, Lord Malfoy,” Harry said with a happy snarl. “I just need an elf that can serve my family.” He saw he had hooked Lucius and needed to reel him in. “I realize trading elves would be doing me a favor and can offer Kreacher and five hundred galleons for a healthy, unattached elf.”

“Make it a thousand galleons and we can do business.”

Harry stared at Lucius for a long time, contemplating whether to haggle over the price before remembering how much stature mattered to Lucius. “A thousand is acceptable, Lord Malfoy.”

“Dobby!” Lucius beckoned.

A sharp crack announced the arrival of the elf. Dobby turned towards Harry curiously before looking back at Lucius. “Master?”

“Fetch me a piece of clothing,” Lucius ordered without even looking down at the elf.

“Your elf is uncollared?” Harry questioned as Dobby disappeared momentarily. “You allow the creature to think for itself?”

“I don’t need a collar to keep my elf from thinking for itself,” Lucius snapped, desperate not to show his ignorance.

Harry conjured a piece of string and tied it like a leash over Kreacher. “I assumed we’d simply trade elves without releasing them from their collars, but I refuse to include a Kovnott collar with Kreacher and receive none in return.”

“Keep your collar then,” Lucius instructed as Dobby reappeared with a sweaty headband.

Dobby saw the collar around Kreacher’s neck and gasped.

Lucius saw the motion and kicked Dobby down the few stairs at the door. “That’ll be your collar soon enough, elf.”

Dobby pleaded with Lucius. “Dobby is sorry! Dobby promises to serve Master well.”

Lucius held up the headband Dobby had brought him and grinned at the creature’s fear. “I’m not going to be your Master.”

Dobby whimpered as he turned towards Harry.

Harry unsnapped the collar from Kreacher and held tightly onto the string. Kreacher exploded in a flurry of action, trying to run away, choking himself against the leash.

Harry yanked on his string and ripped Kreacher through the air falling to the ground in front of him. Harry leaned down into the elf’s face and shouted loud enough to scare all the birds in the area away. “Behave!”

Kreacher was struggling in place and twitchy. A polar opposite from the cool, calm, and collected elf he had been with the collar on.

Harry pulled out a glove from his pocket and held up the string tied around Kreacher's neck. "I am ready. Any last commands you wish to give Dobby before the transfer of ownership?"

Lucius was suddenly having doubts about Kreacher's ability to serve. "Your elf is rabid. How do you expect that thing to replace my elf?"

Harry put a foot on Kreacher pushing him down while he pulled the string around his neck taut. "An elf is an elf, Lord Malfoy. I do not know how it is done around here, but all *respectable* families in America keep their elves collared. Your elf even recognizes the significance."

"Yes," Lucius commented, trying to reaffirm control of this deal. "Why is it that he recognizes that collar?"

"You could ask him," Harry suggested, resisting the urge to really antagonize Lucius.

"I do not want a history lesson from an elf," Lucius snapped. "I was asking you, *Mister* Franklin." He added the emphasis to remind the other man of his place.

"Of course, Lord Malfoy," Harry agreed. "Kovnott collars were how the creatures were first tamed and sold as objects from the goblins that created them. The collars made them into completely subservient but highly magical beings and protectors. It was only after they were sufficiently tamed that the older and less useful creatures traded in their collars and received clothes. All of today's house elves descend from the unworthy and incapable elves. The warrior elves served until they died in battle, while the house elves retired to menial labor."

Lucius sneered at Dobby, who obediently stood there with his head down.

Harry continued to do what he called 'pulling a Hermione' by piling on more information than necessary. "Millennia ago, when house elves were all that remained of the goblins' creation, Kovnott collars were worth a hundred house elves. But when Hogwarts was founded and the concept of a wizard lessened, the creatures became a status symbol of history. The value of a single elf continued to grow—"

"I asked for an answer, not a lecture," Lucius interrupted.

"My apologies, Lord Malfoy," Harry said with a bowed head.

"Why is the collar so important to you then?"

Harry fought the urge to smile and explained, "Because, Lord Malfoy, a collared elf can be spelled into the family manor's magics. Within the home, the Master of the manor has full control over the elf though usually the manor keeps the elf aware of all the manor's needs. Disobedience is handled by the collar, and in the event of a betrayal or the Master's wish, the collar will cleanly behead the elf instantaneously."

Dobby whimpered at the explanation and Harry felt like hugging him.

"In the case of hereditary bound elves," Harry said with a nod towards Kreacher, "The collar will immediately enslave and bring the next elf in line into service. For that reason alone, I would advise you to locate a Kovnott collar for Kreacher."

Lucius had reached a decision. "No. The deal is off unless you include the collar."

"Lord Malfoy," Harry snapped. "This collar is worth as much as the elf and I will not trade a collared elf for an uncollared one. Let alone give you an additional thousand galleons."

"Another negotiation, then?" Lucius smirked. "How much?"

"The collar on its own is worth almost seven thousand galleons," Harry stated as he snapped it back around Kreacher's neck. The elf stood up obediently and calmly waited by Harry's side. "By the terms of our previous agreement, I'm willing to take your elf and six thousand galleons for Kreacher and the collar."

"I'll give you one thousand," Lucius countered.

"One thousand?" Harry said shaking his head. "Five thousand is more than generous, even for a Lord."

"In that case my answer is no," Lucius added. "You may not approach my heir with your offer."

Harry sighed. "I'm sorry, Lord Malfoy, but I'm better off selling Kreacher to someone else interested in the Lord Blacks' secrets and just purchasing a new elf. My apologies for wasting your time."

Harry turned to walk away and feared he might have made a colossal mistake.

"Three thousand galleons and that's my final offer," Lucius called out as the man began to lead his elf away.

"Three thousand?" Harry repeated, turning around. "I could still probably make more, but you would spare me the effort of finding an elf for sale."

"Not a knut over three thousand," Lucius insisted. "And the offer only stands for another minute."

Harry wobbled his hunched form over and looked right into Dobby's eyes. "This elf will behave properly until I can purchase another collar?"

Lucius kicked Dobby in the back and assured. "He's behaved this long without one but if you are unable to handle a house elf..."

Dobby got back up to his feet and stared at Harry. "Dobby needs no collar to know how to be a good elf. Dobby is a good elf."

Harry grinned at Dobby before looking up at Lucius. "We have an accord."

Lucius held out the headband signifying ownership of Dobby. "Let's finish this. We have wasted enough of my time as it is."

Harry accepted the headband and handed the glove symbolizing Kreacher to Lucius. "Agreed." A flash of magic permeated through the air and Kreacher and Dobby both felt the pull of new Masters. "Now there's only the matter of the money."

Lucius reached inside his robe and withdrew a leather pocketbook. He proceeded to scribble out a bank draft for three thousand galleons.

Harry bound Dobby to him, as the elf accepted the magic from his new Master. "Thank you, Lord Malfoy," Harry said accepting the slip of paper stamped with the Malfoy seal. "Do you need any help binding Kreacher to your manor?"

"No, Mr. Franklin," Lucius snidely remarked. "If I need any help, I'll look it up. But if I need a lecture... well, I'd probably find someone more attractive than you to give it. Good day."

Harry watched Lucius order Kreacher inside and followed after the elf.

"What a dick," Harry grumbled. "Follow me, Dobby."

They walked outside the manor grounds, and once they were far enough they apparated away.

Dobby appeared in the middle of Grimmauld Place next to Harry and looked around curiously. "This is the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black," Dobby commented looking up at Harry curiously.

"It is," Harry agreed. "And I've got an offer for you." Harry held up the headband. "If you want this, it's yours."

"Master just got Dobby," Dobby noted. "Master wishes to free Dobby?"

"Not particularly," Harry said. "But I'm giving you the option for freedom. It'll come with a small memory charm, but if you wanted you could go to Hogwarts and work there. I bet you could even talk the Headmaster into paying you to work for him."

"Master knows how to memory charm house elves?" Dobby asked doubtfully.

Harry nodded. "I do."

Dobby frowned and then smiled. "Master must be a very good Master for a house elf to have taught Master that."

Harry grinned knowing that the knowledge couldn't be passed on to others. It was something only a house elf could give a person. "He was a very remarkable house elf and I'd love to tell you about him, but not if you'd rather freedom. My secrets are too important to risk."

"Master memory charmed Kreacher!" Dobby exclaimed in surprise.

Harry shrugged. "He still remembers his name and being born."

Dobby frowned warily. "But why?"

"Sorry. I can't answer that and then later give you this," Harry said shaking the headband.

"Dobby knows," Dobby said. "Dobby is a good house elf and will serve good Master. But Dobby is wondering who taught Master to memory charm house elves."

Harry pulled off the medallion Sirius had given him and his proper appearance returned. "Feel free to call me Harry or Master or whatever the hell you want. I really don't care. And since you asked, I'll tell you that it was an extremely brave elf named Dobby that taught me how to memory charm house elves."

"Dobby did?" Dobby asked in awe.

"Not you, not exactly," Harry added. "A different elf named Dobby though it was kind of you."

"That's what Dobby said," Dobby clarified. "Dobby said Dobby did."

"Right, I just... I mean..." Harry sighed. "This could get confusing real quick."

"Dobby doesn't mind if Master pretends Dobby is Dobby. Dobby doubts Dobby minds either if Dobby is a good elf. Dobby is a good elf," Dobby rattled off with a grin.

"Right," Harry uncertainly agreed. "Maybe I should explain this and Dobby should stay quiet."

“Dobby is here?” Dobby asked looking around. “Dobby is confused.”

Harry was starting to remember why he offered Dobby freedom in the first place.

Harry still wasn't sure if Dobby understood it, but the elf was eager to help him gather his gear. Sirius and Harry had already spent 68 hundred galleons on the Kovnott collar they jinxed and another 15 thousand galleons to buy a special acid.

To utilize the full power of the collar, Lucius needed to key the collar into the wards as opposed to the keying in the elf. The stronger the manor wards, the stronger the connection. The success of the evening's work hinged on whether Lucius had located accurate instructions.

Sirius had been put into an enchanted sleep, set to wear off after eighteen hours. He was then transfigured into one of the jewels encrusted on the collar. When the sleep enchantment wore off around three in the morning, Sirius would transform into his dog form, reversing the transfiguration on him. Then he had to prepare for Harry's arrival, knowing he'd be apparating to him at the proper time.

Harry nodded at Dobby and covered himself in an invisibility cloak. His watch beeped once, indicating 3:30 A.M. and with a soft pop he apparated straight to Sirius' side.

Harry saw Sirius pouring magic into a keystone and whipped his cloak off. “I'm here.”

“Oh thank Merlin,” Sirius said letting his magic relax. “I couldn't actively change the wards without drawing attention, but I figured if I just held them open without changing anything you could power through.”

Harry looked at the stunned and unmoving Kreacher on the floor. “You realize the sort of life we're condemning Kreacher...” Harry trailed off at the look Sirius was giving him and proceeded to obliviate the last half hour from the elf. “Right. Never mind. So what's the status on Malfoy?”

“We gotta stay quiet,” Sirius said accepting his backpack from Harry. “Lucius and Narcissa are asleep and both wearing Malfoy rings, so no direct magic on them. I thought about silencing their bedroom door, but figured it might be a risk.”

“Shit,” Harry swore. “As much as I’d like to ransack the place, let’s just hit drawing room floor and blood-warded safe.”

“Alright,” Sirius agreed. “But I’m still going to crap on their carpet.”

Harry nodded and the pair stealthily made their way through Malfoy manor and towards the drawing room.

“Did you bring the stuff for a Fidelius?”

“I’ve always got stuff for one,” Harry said. “But I’m not keyed into the wards. So the best I can do is just a chunk in the middle of the room. And more than likely he will feel that.”

“You think we can do this quiet enough for three hours or however long the acid takes?”

Harry saw how energized Sirius was and how vulnerable they’d be for a long time. “Good point. Go take your crap real quick, because once the Fidelius is up, we’re not crossing it.”

Sirius nodded and walked down to the middle of the hall and squatted.

Harry put the finishing touches on the anchor stone placement. “I thought you were going to transform?”

“I didn’t want dog shit on his floor,” Sirius explained. “I wanted people shit.”

“Well are you done?” Harry asked. “Because you know he’s probably going to wake up.”

“Let’s do it,” Sirius said hopping inside the small warded square.

Harry quickly flooded the stones with magic and sealed the charm, locking them in. “That’ll hold,” he said in exhaustion before noticing

Sirius had already pulled out the first bottle of acid. "Be careful with that."

"I know," Sirius said. He'd rolled the carpet over and revealed the large floor safe and door on top. "This stupid thing better be in here."

"Whatever's in here is ours," Harry assured him. "And is important enough to the Malfoys to keep in a safe. But it'll be here."

Sirius took out one of the glimmering mesh balls and handed the other to Harry. "Start your scrubbing."

Harry dropped to his knees next to Sirius. Together the pair of them rubbed the shine off the large empty front of the door, below the Malfoy crest. They couldn't use magic, and had enlisted the help of the Weasley twins in creating what they called diamond wool. It was similar to steel wool but with a little more kick. Fred and George only knew it had to be completely non-magical, even if manipulating the materials to make it was a magical process. Any magic on the safe and they wouldn't be able to get in.

They'd only been scrubbing for a couple of minutes before they saw Lucius Malfoy running down the hall with his wand up.

They glanced at each other and went back to their scrubbing, this time a little quieter than before.

"What is it?" Narcissa called out as she pulled her night robe tighter. She saw her husband crouched down to something. "Did someone... defecate?"

Lucius looked up and around, his eyes passing right over the Fidelius protected square without pause. "Something's going on."

"Has someone broken in?" she asked.

"No," Lucius replied. "No intruders at least."

"If you don't know what, then it was probably an ally passing the Dark Lord's wards to the public areas."

“Those triggering don’t even wake me,” Lucius retorted. “This was something different.” Lucius sniffed the air as he got a nose full of the present left in the hallway. “Something personal.”

Narcissa rolled her eyes and turned away from her husband. “You probably just upset Draco again. I’m going back to bed.”

Lucius was still sitting there musing over what had happened. “Kreacher!”

The elf appeared with a pop. “Master?”

“Clean this up,” Lucius ordered.

Lucius stalked by the entrance to the drawing room and continued right on past.

Kreacher could be heard mumbling in the distance. “Bad Master, bad.”

Sirius and Harry’s arms were burning and Harry let up his furious scrubbing. “That might be enough.”

Sirius carefully pulled his hand back, and looked at all the small cuts from the diamond wool. “It better be.”

Harry leaned down and blew the stone dust and shavings away from a central circle, about a half meter in diameter.

Together the pair of Lord Blacks, each took a bottle of the acid and began to trace the edge of the hole they were making. It sizzled and steamed on contact but was clearly eating away at the obsidian.

“You’re sure this is going to work?” Sirius asked vanishing the steam collecting inside the Fidelius charm.

“It should,” Harry explained. “The magic of the safe is never tampered with. We just destroy the physical aspects of it, leaving the magic intact.”

“And the gloves and sheets?”

“The magic muting gloves allow us to reach in, wrap the items in the sheets, and lift the wrapped items through the physical hole.”

“It sounds like it will work,” Sirius said drizzling more acid along his lines. “I just find it hard to believe you managed to crack a safe that’s been considered uncrackable for centuries.”

Harry was layering in the acid and vanishing steam periodically. “Says the man whose subconscious came up with a plan where he was the stud on a house elf’s collar?”

“Yeah,” Sirius agreed. “But I’m a genius.”

“No,” Harry retorted knowing they were going to be applying acid for a couple of hours. “I’m a genius.” And just like that the game was afoot to see who had the stamina to out-annoy the other.

Somehow in the midst of their marathon game, they managed to discuss Dobby and Kreacher, Quidditch, Remus and Bellatrix, Tonks, the Potters, life, love and happiness.

“My genius is so thick and meaty,” Sirius argued. “Female kelpies-”

“Stop!” Harry cried out. He remembered he was supposed to be quiet and whispered harshly. “Stop!”

“You recognize my genius?” Sirius clarified, lifting his nearly empty acid bottle.

“No,” Harry explained and pointed down. “We’re through. You’re dripping acid on our goodies now.”

“Shit,” Sirius said placing the acid to the side. He slipped on one of the extra long special gloves. Just in time to see Harry punch hard on the remaining chunk of wall that hadn’t been eaten through.

“Oww,” Harry yelled pulling his hand back.

Sirius moved into place and using his gloved arm punched in the same place Harry did. “Oww.”

The remaining pieces of obsidian bent inwards in a way that normal stone could never bend.

Harry grabbed a large cloth of magic muting material and stuck his arm as far in as he safely could. He grabbed onto a stack of ledgers and wrapped them up in the cloth. He slowly extracted the tightly wound objects pulled them through the active magical protections of the safe. "See? I'm a genius."

Sirius accepted the bundle and unwrapped the magic muting cloth. He quickly flipped through the stack of documents and personal books. "There's no diary here."

"Stuff that in your bag. We're taking everything from this safe," Harry said, having spotted the diary and reaching for it. He grabbed an extra magic muting cloth and wrapped it around his upper arm, so he could reach deeper into the safe. "Got it."

Harry slowly withdrew diary, wrapped in another magic muting cloth. He handed the diary to Sirius and grabbed all the rest of the cloths. "Let me clear the rest of this out. You bag it up."

Sirius nodded, carefully revealing the book, doing his best to not physically touch the horcrux.

Harry had a system going of just loosely wrapping, extracting, and dumping items on the floor. Harry saw Sirius staring at the open diary. "Don't start writing in that thing. We can play with it later."

"Harry," Sirius weakly said interrupting Harry's pattern. "Harry, I think you better take a look at this."

Harry reassessed their surroundings knowing they hadn't seen Lucius in a while. He took the diary from Sirius and realized he felt not a drop of magic from the thing. The pages were yellowed indicating its age, but a clearly newer fresh piece of parchment was stuck on top. It had been spelled so that only certain people could read it. The most damning part was that the letter had been spelled specifically for Harry and Sirius.

Dear Sirs,

Do you prefer Death Eater Bandits or the Lords Black?

I suspect I've caught your attention enough that you don't care how I refer to you but I do hope we can become allies. Or at the least avoid becoming enemies.

I know what you were expecting this to be, just like I know why you broke into Alan Weston's home. I've been wondering just what other places and treasures you have uncovered.

We need to discuss this in person. There is a hidden cellar underneath the Shrieking Shack between Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. Men of your talents should have no problem getting in there. I'll know when you arrive and will meet you there within an hour.

Harry glanced up at Sirius who was looking very pale. "Fuck."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Shouldn’t we be hightailing it the fuck out of here, right about now?”

“Hang on,” Harry said reading through the note again. “Let’s think this through.”

Sirius didn’t have Harry’s patience. “How about this? Someone knows way too much and we’re sitting in the middle of the Malfoy fucking Manor. Let’s think this through at home instead.”

“Keep your panties on, Padfoot,” Harry chided. “We’re under a Fidelius. We’re safe for the moment.”

“We’ve got an hour to walk into what we both know is a trap,” Sirius argued.

“No, we don’t,” Harry replied with certainty. “The hour referred to an hour after reaching the Shrieking Shack. No, the person who left this note didn’t know when we’d be here.” Harry was still thinking through the situation. He looked closer at massive ruby brooch in the pile of plunder. “And they seem to not care that we’re robbing Malfoy.”

“Malfoy thinks this is the real diary,” Sirius added before settling in quiet contemplation as well. “You think this is That Fucker?”

Harry intermittently winced and frowned. “It doesn’t matter if this mystery fucker is that particular fucker or just some other fucker.”

“Fuck,” Sirius added.

“It’s... curious,” Harry mused. “This note feels more like a courtesy than a threat.”

“You think maybe it’s another thief?”

Harry shook his head in consternation. “I don’t know. He calls us the Lords Black, so if he wanted to blackmail us, he could’ve gotten a hold of us in many much easier ways. And how the hell does he know about the horcruxes?”

“Could he have wanted us here? Needed to confirm something? Maybe trap us?”

“I don’t think so,” Harry uncertainly responded. “But let’s load up the rest of this stuff and get out of here.”

Sirius frowned. “I know we usually aim for quiet unobtrusive exits, but can we please cause just a little wanton destruction this time?”

“They’ll know right away if we do that,” Harry argued. “Lucius barely thinks about creatures he considers below him, but even he might connect the whole new house elf and getting robbed at the same time.”

“But we’re in Malfoy Manor!” Sirius whined. “If someone’s fucking with us, we may not have another chance like this.”

Harry frowned hating the situation as much as Sirius. Harry’s eyes trailed over the pile of things they’d not bagged yet when something caught his attention. A plan began to formulate in his mind. “What if we don’t take credit?”

“What do you mean?”

Harry pointed towards an old case with several dials on it. “Do you know what that is?”

“No,” Sirius said picking it up.

“You ever hear of a Gubraithian funeral?” Harry asked with a grin.

Sirius looked at the case in glee. “No way!”

“I’m thinking let’s tone it down from burning too long,” Harry said accepting the case, while inspecting the contents. “And instead we just let it go real big and burn fast.”

“Not forever?” Sirius pouted.

Harry shook his head. "We do this big enough and they'll think everything got toasted. We'll make it look like an accident that started inside the safe."

"We take no credit because there was no robbery," Sirius realized.

"No robbery," Harry said. "And this mystery fucker doesn't know we're on to him."

Sirius understood how advantageous this exit would be. He was slowly nodding. "I suppose it'll have to do. It's going to blow big?"

"Real big," Harry said while readjusting the settings of the explosive magical device. He looked up at Sirius who was bagging up the rest of the contents. "And don't forget, Sirius, you're still keyed in to the wards."

Sirius smiled even brighter, getting on board with the 'no apparent robbery' plan. He finished storing away everything and pulled his backpack over his shoulder.

"Okay," Harry said, pleased he'd set it right. "Here's what's gonna happen. I'm going to pull the Fidelius down, at the same time as I trigger the funeral. I set the delay for three seconds. Lucius will feel the Fidelius come down, but hopefully he'll attribute it to the massive fiery explosion."

"Three seconds?" Sirius asked.

"You're keyed in to the wards so you're going to be apparating us both out," Harry nodded. "Questions?"

Sirius saw Harry drape a magic muting cloth over the physical hole in the blood-warded safe. He walked over and put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Nope."

"Ready?"

Sirius nodded.

Harry nodded back and touched his wand to the front dial on the case. Four invisible magical arms reached out and grabbed the anchor stones right as the tip of Harry's wand began to glow, igniting the Gubraithian funeral. He dropped it over the hole as the anchor stones flew towards him and the room flickered in and out of view. "Go! Go! Go!"

Sirius drew on Harry's strength and apparated them out of Malfoy Manor. The last thing Harry saw was the cloth wrapping around the case as it fell into the safe, without triggering any of the safe's protections.

A couple of apparition hops were added for safety's sake before the pair of thieves dropped off their score at secure location. Rather than sorting through it now, they agreed to just head back at Grimmauld Place.

Sirius and Harry stood there silently, coming down from the adrenaline-filled night of failure and success.

"Someone knows way too much," Sirius said.

Harry nodded pensively.

Sirius realized he felt a lot less safe than he had a day ago. "What are we going to do about it?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know."

"You got the diary and note?"

Harry pulled them from inside his robe and handed them over. "Not a drop of magic on either."

Sirius read through the note again. "It's not Dumbledore."

"No," Harry agreed.

"And it's not Voldemort."

Harry slowly shook his head. "No."

"I think it's That Fucker," Sirius concluded.

Harry sighed and turned to walk up the stairs. "I hope it is."

"You do?" Sirius wondered.

Harry stopped on the first step, with his hand on the banister. "There are enough dangerous fuckers in this world as it is. We don't need more."

Sirius frowned. "You're not thinking about leaving, are you?"

"No," Harry assured him. "But I am starting to miss not having to worry about wizards smarter and more powerful than me."

"Well what did you search me out for then?" Sirius said with a grin. His grin faltered when he saw Harry still looked tired. "Didn't you have politicians and Death Eaters after you in the old world?"

Harry shrugged. "Not as much as you might think. The remaining Death Eaters remembered my escape. Couple that with the fact that I took down Voldemort and I earned a healthy amount of fear in those trying to oppose or use me for their own gain."

"You could always take out Voldemort here," Sirius suggested.

Harry shook his head. "I can't, Sirius. And if you knew what I haven't told you, you wouldn't want me to either."

"Fair enough," Sirius said, making it clear he wasn't pushing the issue. "I'm just brainstorming." Sirius paused, noticing Harry was standing on the first step, still lost in thought. "What are you thinking?"

Harry turned to his godfather and looked at him incredulously.

Sirius exasperatedly explained, "I haven't forgotten tonight. I'm just wondering specifically what's got you making that face."

"I'm thinking about the person who left the note," Harry added as he began to walk up the stairs. "They were either good enough or close enough to Malfoy to get into the vault. That points towards Death

Eater if they were trusted or Death Eater thuggery if they weren't. And it's only been in the last few weeks."

"We hit Weston's almost three months ago," Sirius inquired.

"I know," Harry said from the top of the stairs. "But this was the fucker watching us at the Gaunt House. I'm almost certain of it."

"You think?" Sirius asked.

"He knows that we knew exactly where to look for the ring," Harry clarified. "That's why he thought we might know exactly where to look for the diary. I need to think on this."

Sirius turned towards the kitchen. "And I need to drink on this."

Harry woke up around one in the afternoon and headed for the kitchen for some late breakfast.

He walked in and saw Dobby sitting cross-legged on the kitchen table, looking worriedly at a drunk Sirius.

"Great news!" Sirius cheered loudly.

Harry looked at Sirius doubtfully.

"Malfoy Manor is still burning," Sirius happily added, showing off the Daily Prophet's front page photo. A column of flame could be seen escaping a good sized hole in the roof. "Lucius is being cited for not registering a class one restricted item as a family heirloom."

Harry wasn't certain but he thought he saw Dobby smile. "I set it for fifteen minutes."

"You set it for fifteen days," Sirius happily corrected.

"Oops," Harry said thinking that as mistakes go, this one was pretty fucking awesome. "Do you think it still...?"

Sirius nodded. "The DMLE investigators early determination was that if the unregistered Gubraithian device burned hot enough to destroy a

blood-warded safe, then it definitely burned hot enough to completely incinerate the contents.”

“Fuck me,” Harry grinned. “Karma’s making a quick comeback.”

“I’ll say,” Sirius agreed. “You got a letter from Albus.”

“Aww bugger,” Harry swore. “You want to get me a bowl of cereal, Dobby?”

“Thank you, Master,” Dobby said, eagerly hopping off the table and over towards the cabinets.

Harry blinked. “Did you order him to stay there with you?”

Sirius drank the last of his bottle. “I didn’t want to drink alone.”

“You made him *drink*?” Harry asked in surprise. He noticed Dobby was pouring cereal and missing the bowl.

“Dobby, stop!”

Dobby was still pouring cereal onto the counter as he turned to Harry and said, “Yes, Master.”

“Here,” Harry said, grabbing the box of cereal from Dobby. “Do you need any potions? Or a hangover cure?”

Dobby shook his head but leaned over and hugged Harry. “Dobby loves Master.”

Harry patted the slightly inebriated elf on the back. “Just take it easy, Dobby. Relax, sleep it off, whatever you need to do. And check with me the next time that idiot gives you a stupid order, okay?”

“Thank you, Master,” Dobby said snapping his fingers. He turned to look at his tiny elf hand in surprise. “Dobby thought-”

The little elf with low tolerance disappeared in mid-sentence from the kitchen.

Sirius snickered. “New toys are fun.”

"Dobby's not a toy," Harry scolded as he added milk to his cereal. He sat down at the table across from Sirius and looked at the letter. "What do you think the odds are that it's good news?"

"It's not a howler," Sirius said. "And Fawkes delivered it."

"Fawkes?" Harry asked looking up. "Didn't stick around?"

Sirius exaggeratedly shook his head. "Stupid bird ran away after I ordered Dobby to tackle him."

"You need to get laid," Harry chided with a smile.

Sirius growled, knowing he still had two more days before his next appointment with Healer Armstrong. "I will hurt you. I'm an angry drunk."

Harry just smiled quietly knowing it would infuriate Sirius. He opened up the letter from Albus and read it quickly. "Lovely."

"I'd ask what," Sirius began.

Harry was already answering. "He knows what a horcrux is and he knows we did something to Jimmy."

"But I'm too drunk to remember anything," Sirius finished.

Harry figured that was just as well. He looked over at Sirius and recalled an especially unpleasant memory. "You know those charmed mirrors we used to use?"

"I'm not wearing the homo-erotic arranged marriage necklaces except we're both doing recon at the same time. That was the agreement."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "You know why we have to use the necklaces."

"Yeah because you broke your mirror," Sirius pouted.

Harry shook his head. "If you were capable of using them like an adult..."

"I think the purpose for which I *accidentally* used the wrong mirror *proves* I'm an adult," Sirius argued.

"You were shaving your balls!"

"There are places you need a mirror to see," Sirius defended.

"You called me on it!"

Sirius waved Harry off. "I wasn't calling you. I was making an observation after getting the mirror angled right so I had a clear look at my-"

"I thought my mirror was cursed and showing me the face of true evil."

"Even if it was, you didn't have to break it."

"Yes, I most certainly did," Harry forcefully snapped.

Sirius tipped back an empty bottle and was trying to suck a few more drops out. "You're the one who brought it up." Sirius dropped his arm and empty bottle down in disgust. "What were we talking about again?"

"Charm-linked mirrors," Harry repeated in irritation. "Were they like a family heirloom? Or did you make them yourself?"

"Family heirloom? Are you kidding?" Sirius asked skeptically. "A pair of Lookie Talkies is about two galleons at any Wiz-mart."

"Lookie Talkies?" Harry repeated thinking that sounded smarter than most magical names but still dumb as hell.

"Yeah. They're children's toys," Sirius explained. "We used to use them all the time when we'd play blood traitors and muggle..." Sirius trailed off. "You probably wouldn't have played the same games I did growing up."

"Probably not," Harry confidently agreed.

“Well except for *Tie-Harry-to-the-back-of-the-bus*,” Sirius grinned. “Everybody played that one.”

“How the hell do you remember that when you don’t even remember what we were talking about three minutes ago?”

Sirius shook another empty bottle and frowned. “What were we talking about?”

Harry sighed. “Take a hangover potion and go to sleep, Padfoot.”

It showed how out of it Sirius was that he obeyed without protest.

Harry tucked a brand new pair of Lookie-Talkies into his cloak pocket and walked up the long path towards Hogwarts. He briefly wondered the odds that Jimmy would just happen to activate the Marauder’s Map and notice an extra Potter on it. Harry wasn’t worried this time though, because he knew how the young man would react.

Harry, not looking forward to the conversation with Albus, was slightly tempted to try and locate Jimmy first. It was late afternoon, and Harry had no clue what Jimmy’s schedule was like. Albus, Harry expected to be in his office. But if Harry were to go hunting for Jimmy, he would be risking getting cornered by Lily.

Harry felt he had enough things rolling around in his head that he could safely put ‘constant deception and lies of omission towards the elder Potters’ onto the back burner where it’d set up camp and been living ever since Harry arrived in this world. It certainly didn’t help matters that so far Lily Potter could detect bullshit from Harry better than a Master Legilimens.

Harry estimated that sacrificing his mother’s soul probably meant that karmically, every other Lily Potter in existence had him by the balls until the end of time. Of course when Harry had made that deal, he wasn’t planning on actually meeting any of them.

But that’s what bottles and back burners were made for, Harry told himself, putting things like emotions and uncomfortable confrontations safely away and out of sight.

Harry was so pleased with his plan of inaction that he wasn't even watching where he was going and managed to walk right into the door.

Harry fell back on his ass tumbling down the front steps. "Fuck me! What the hell?"

"Are you alright?" a gentle voice inquired as the front door creaked open.

"Hang on, mum," another voice interrupted. A second redheaded woman emerged and looked down towards Harry with a grin. "Was that an offer?"

"Sarah!" Lily scolded her daughter. "That's no way to talk to... oh. Harry. Excuse me, Lord Black."

"I'm sure people talk to him that way quite often," Sarah commented, "if Witches Weekly is to be believed."

Sarah and Lily Potter had both walked down the steps to help Harry and were looking at him oddly. Sarah saw Harry wincing and asked, "Did you hit your head?"

"My nose mainly," Harry grumbled, testing the sensitivity of his schnozz. "What happened? I thought the doors opened automatically."

Lily looked at Harry curiously, wondering if he'd somehow attended Hogwarts. She was doing her best to ignore the monster in her chest sensation. "They open automatically for students and invited guests. I take it no one is expecting you today?"

"No, I..." Harry stumbled over the words. "Uh... Albus wrote me this morning."

"Oh good," Lily said as she and Sarah helped Harry to his feet. "I was hoping that was why you were here."

Harry glanced over at Sarah and then Lily, thinking he'd never feel normal around either of these two people. "Err... why is that?"

“Something’s been bothering him,” Lily replied thinking Albus rarely showed it, but she knew him better than most. “And a magical brother might bring him out of his funk.”

Harry knew she was speaking of the brotherhood charm but couldn’t stop himself from glancing at Sarah again. “I’ll see what I can do about that. You know if he’s in his office?”

“Should be,” Lily replied. She looked towards her daughter. “Did you need to check Harry out?”

Sarah smirked at her mother. “Need’s kind of a strong word but I like what I-”

“His head, his nose,” Lily snapped. “The fall, you know what I meant. And don’t think I won’t start carrying around baby pictures.”

“Baby pictures are cute,” Sarah countered.

Lily tilted her head down at the unexpected challenge. “And do we remember when we kept trying to wear our little brother’s diapers?”

Sarah stared at her mother aghast.

Harry hurriedly interjected, “I’m fine. It was nothing.”

“Thank you,” Lily said, thinking she may have gone too far based on the looks her daughter was giving her.

“But I wouldn’t mind seeing those pictures sometime,” Harry mischievously added.

Lily smothered a grin as her daughter glared at her.

Sarah dangerously warned, “The things I could show Dad in a pensieve.”

Lily decided at that point she had definitely gone too far. She smiled pleasantly at Harry, “Would you like us to walk you to the Headmaster’s office?”

"No, please," Harry said as he made a fist and knocked himself in the head. "I'm fine." Harry winced, "Okay, that kind of hurt, but seriously. I'm fine."

Sarah looked at Harry in slight surprise. "You know how to find the Headmaster's office?"

Harry nodded with certainty.

"Don't worry," Lily assured her daughter while giving a knowing look to Harry. "Lord Black knows his way around Hogwarts better than you think."

Harry watched the first two female Potters he'd ever remembered meeting walk down the rest of the steps and along the path towards Hogsmeade. He idly realized he could try and track down Jimmy without worry when he felt a tug on a different piece of active magic.

"Harry?" the wizened old voice greeted.

"Albus," Harry replied turning towards the Headmaster with a look of innocence on his face.

Albus frowned. "Why don't we talk in my office where I can yell and you can lie with impunity?"

"Sounds like fun," Harry agreed and led the way.

Albus immediately went for the seat behind his desk, establishing himself into a position of power. "What did you do to my Head Boy?"

Harry glanced around the office, noting Fawkes perch was unoccupied. "What makes you think I did anything?"

"Harry."

"What do you think I did?"

"Harry."

"I'm not kidding," Harry argued. "For all I know, you think I cursed him, so I need to hear an accusation to respond to."

Albus was unruffled. "You memory charmed him."

"I did, did I?"

"Harry James Potter."

Harry playfully winced. "Ouch. Breaking out the full name?"

"If treating you like a child is the only way to get answers," Albus said defending his actions.

Harry shrugged and helped himself to the candy dish. "It sounds like you have the answers."

"Not the why," Albus retorted, "nor the how."

Harry smirked inwardly, deducing that Albus hadn't been able to find the block. "Did you check him for memory charms?"

Albus nodded. "Twice. And I must concede your skill at obliterating is superior to my own."

Harry shrugged. "There are four charms I'm real good at. Memory charming is my fourth best."

Albus was rubbing his chin in thought, "I assume summoning and banishing are the top two."

Harry nodded.

"So what is the third?"

"You don't want to try and guess?" Harry said popping a lemon drop in his mouth. "The third one has more than a little personal significance."

Albus thought about what he knew of the young man relaxing across from him. "Snake charming?"

Harry blinked. "Is there a field of magic for that?"

“There are a few ancient spells involving serpents, but I believe snakes typically obey a parselmouth, making many of them unnecessary. Nevertheless, I can see that was an inaccurate guess.” Albus shook his head. “I’m not sure I know you well enough to think of any others with personal significance.”

“Tsk, tsk,” Harry shook his head. “After all, the other you talked my parents into using the charm that inadvertently led to my orphanhood.”

“The Fidelius,” Albus said in realization. “The reason for your interest in warding?”

“Part of it,” Harry agreed.

“And you’re better at casting the Fidelius than memory charming?” Albus asked more than a little impressed.

“I don’t know if I’d say better, but there’s definitely less competition.”

Albus inclined his head in understanding. “Does this mean you’re not going to be telling me the how or why?”

“The how is easy,” Harry answered. “I knew you’d search him for a memory charm when he got back. And unless you’re very careful doing that, you tend to kick up a lot of dust.”

“Being careful takes time and attentive observation of the memories,” Albus reasoned aloud. “Something a cursory examination never is.”

Harry nodded. “Then I come back a couple days later and make use of all that dust you kicked up. That’s why even if you located it... It’ll appear as though you cast it.”

“It sounds like a form of layering,” Albus commented.

“Exactly,” Harry grinned. “Layering is where memory charms really get fun. You should’ve seen the job I did on these Unspeakables.”

“Excuse me,” Albus said after Harry suddenly went quiet.

“Nothing bad,” Harry said waving away Albus’ worries.

“Mmm-hmm.”

Harry tiredly explained. “It was my arrival in this world. New person comes shooting out the Exit, and they’d probably grill me for days. I wanted to locate my godfather, so I had to send them in a different direction.”

Albus snapped his fingers. “You’re Miss Lupin’s assignment! That explains a lot.”

Harry nodded.

“But what about when she had to go away for days at a time, undercover?”

Harry shrugged. “We rented a lot of movies and laid on the couch.”

Albus frowned in disappointment. “I shouldn’t have to remind myself you’re not a bad person.”

“You can be a good person and a bad influence,” Harry offered.

Albus murmured in resignation. “You’ve given me the how but still no why. Should I stop asking?”

“I’m going to tell you the why,” Harry assured him. “In case he comes in again and we have to obliviate him again.”

“We?” Albus doubtfully questioned.

“The why,” Harry continued, “is because Jimmy convinced me to. It was his idea.”

“It was?” Albus repeated, ensuring the brotherhood charm was still working.

Harry nodded. “Frankly, we don’t trust Snape not to rip the knowledge from Jimmy’s head.”

Albus frowned. “Professor Snape has my full-”

“Blah, blah,” Harry interrupted. “You’re as blind to that man as Cornelius Fudge is to fashion.”

Albus frowned harsher.

“Trust me,” Harry argued. “Until you’ve been a Potter in his classroom for a few years, you won’t get it. I mean it. The sheer volume of hate and petty in that man is limitless where I’m concerned and it doesn’t sound like Jimmy’s much better.”

Albus nodded slowly. “I’ll consider it a personal issue and the matter closed. But do not underestimate what I will do when it comes to protecting the wellbeing of students entrusted to my care.”

Harry knew many people doubted Albus’ judgment, and a few doubted his sanity, but no one doubted his dedication to Hogwarts. “Your intentions are not the same as your actions.”

Albus tilted his head to watch Harry impassively. “Do tell.”

“I’ve no doubt you act in what you believe to be the best interests of students,” Harry explained when he saw Albus scrutinizing him. “But sometimes I think your attempts to redeem men like Snape do more harm to innocents than you realize.”

Albus frowned at the words. “Severus Snape needs no redemption. Please,” Albus said stopping Harry from interrupting. “He never became a Death Eater and you’ve only met him briefly.”

Harry reluctantly had to admit this world’s Snape could be a bit different. But he doubted it.

“My counterpart may have had a blind spot for Severus, and I may as well, but you must admit that you cannot view him objectively either.”

Harry grumbled but didn’t disagree. “He’s a poohead.”

“Moving on,” Albus said steepling his hands together as he leaned forward. “Tell me everything you can about the Dark Lord’s horcrux.”

Harry winced at unexpected lack of subtlety from the Headmaster.
“Looked that one up, eh?”

Albus’ look was grave. “You were not particularly discreet in your allusions towards its importance.”

“It?”

“The horcrux,” Albus replied.

“Right,” Harry grimaced. “*It*.”

Albus frowned as he felt the brotherhood charm buzzing. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“You ever think horcruxes get lonely?”

Albus paused at the odd question. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” Harry said, fully aware that answer wasn’t going to fly.

“Harry.”

“So you know what a horcrux is, right?”

Albus nodded affirmatively.

“And you know how they’re made? And how supposedly you can’t make more than one because it’d leave you insane?”

“Oh no,” Albus said catching on.

Harry nodded ruefully. “You ever hear Voldemort’s spiel on how seven is the most magically powerful number?”

“Seven?” Albus whispered the word in horror. “Now is really not the time for your offbeat sense of humor.”

“Yeah,” Harry admitted with a scratch of his head. “This world is different. I mean a lot’s the same, but not everything. Even still, I’m reasonably sure on the number.”

“You know where they are,” Albus realized.

“This world’s different,” Harry retorted. “They’re not even all the same objects here.”

Albus sat back and relaxed slightly, secure in the knowledge that Harry had been investigating them. “How so?”

Harry saw a calculating look in the old man’s eye. “Alright, well, I know of one that’s definitely new to me. And to be honest, I’m kind of surprised you haven’t figured it out.”

Albus arched an eyebrow. “Godric’s Hollow?”

Harry realized he’d spoken too soon on what the Headmaster knew and nodded. “My death was used to make a horcrux out of Sirius Black’s skull.”

“Oh my word,” Albus muttered in dawning realization that Voldemort was truly beyond redemption.

“And in this world,” Harry continued. “From what I hear, the Dark Lord doesn’t even have a familiar.”

“Not to my knowledge,” Albus replied when Harry waited for a response.

Harry nodded. “In mine, he had a snake named Nagini, which he possessed frequently and contained another piece of him.”

Albus cast a quick Patronus charm, sending a ghostly phoenix from his office.

Harry looked at Albus warningly.

“Professor McGonagall was about to interrupt us,” Albus said, knowing the brotherhood charm would assure Harry. “I told her this was a bad time.”

“If you need to-”

“No, please,” Albus said urging Harry to stay.

“Sorry,” Harry offered. “I just got your note, and figured I’d drop by while Sirius sleeps off his bender.”

“I do have dinner plans I’d prefer not cancel,” Albus urged. “So why don’t you tell me which horcruxes you’ve already located and which others you are still looking for.”

Harry wasn’t surprised at what the Headmaster had deduced. “What makes you think that... yeah. Who am I kidding?” Harry gave up acting coy. “Three of them are safe. Three of them aren’t.”

Albus felt pleasantly surprised. “You have recovered three of them? And I thought you said there were seven.”

Harry nodded. “Six horcruxes, the seventh piece of soul stayed in him.”

“Of course,” Albus said in understanding. “What can you tell me about them?”

Harry frowned. “I’m not some resource for you to tap, Albus. Nor am I member of your Order.” Harry clenched and sent magic into the brotherhood charm.

Albus clenched and strengthened the charm on his end. He forcefully asserted, “Nor am I the man for whom you hold so many conflicting emotions.” Albus softened. “I do not see you as a resource, Harry. I’m not proud of the Albus Dumbledore you knew in your old world. And I cannot say that faced with the decisions he had to make, that I would have made them any differently. But I will not accept the blame you feel he deserves.”

Harry looked away, slightly embarrassed.

“This charm,” Albus said flaring the brotherhood bond, “is so that we can better understand each other and work together. It should not be a security blanket because you suspect ulterior motives in my every action.”

"I know. It's not you," Harry argued. "I'm just... I'm feeling a lot more vulnerable suddenly and frankly, paranoia's probably saved my life a time or two."

Albus popped a lemon drop into his own mouth and smiled. "True. But it's probably cost you opportunities as well. Would you like to talk about it?"

Harry looked up at the Headmaster. He hesitated before answering, "Not really, but even if I did, this is stuff I have to talk to Sirius about first anyway."

"Fair enough," Dumbledore accepted. "And so now when I politely inquire about the horcruxes, can I assume you won't think I only want your knowledge and to be rid of you? Or that my only concern in things is how they pertain to the downfall of Voldemort?"

"Yes, yes, point made," Harry grumbled. "Now you're just rubbing it in."

Albus held a pleasant smile that slipped into a slight frown when Harry stayed quiet. "How can I help you locate the other horcruxes if you won't tell me anything? I suspect I know more about this world than you."

"The skull," Harry decided. "That's the one you should focus on."

Albus nodded slowly in thought. "And what of the others?"

"The three that are safe..." Harry paused, "you don't need to worry about." Harry saw Albus giving him a knowing look and explained, "It's between me and Sirius, I'm not just being petulant."

"Mmm-hmm," Albus said doubtfully.

"The other two?" Harry said, running through things in his own mind. "I think... I think someone else got to them already."

Albus sat up suddenly. "Someone else knows? The wizard in black?"

"Someone," Harry shrugged. "I'm pretty sure it's not a Dark Lord approved someone, but I don't know why they're collecting."

"What are they?"

Harry was still thinking about the note from the other horcrux hunter and answered distractedly, "The Slytherin family ring in my world was hidden at the Gaunt house. When I looked I saw signs it had once been there and there were collapsing wards surrounding the former hiding place."

Albus frowned. "You don't think Voldemort removed it for safe-keeping?"

"No," Harry assured him.

"And why not?"

Harry turned to Albus, suddenly realizing how distracted he'd been. "For reasons I'm not going to go into."

Albus sat back and raised his hands in surrender. "I'm not pushing. Just asking once."

"Right," Harry chuckled as he decided on exactly what he would reveal. "I will tell you that I think That Fucker or whoever it is that has the ring, that they also have the diary."

"The diary?" Albus perked up.

"The other horcrux," Harry confirmed. "It too appeared to have been moved by the same person."

"Where was it?" Albus inquired.

Harry snapped his mouth shut. He shook his head. "It wasn't there, so it doesn't matter." Harry glanced at his watch. "Why don't we call it a day and you can make your dinner plans?"

Albus looked at Harry hopefully. "There isn't anything else you'd like to share?"

“Actually,” Harry said taking pleasure in playing with Albus’ emotions. “I need to talk to Jimmy before I go. You mind telling me where he is?”

Albus frowned. “No.”

“Was that a ‘no’ you don’t mind? Or a-”

“No.”

“It’ll just take a moment,” Harry argued.

Albus reached into one of his drawers and twisted a number of concentric circles until a point lit up with a blue light and settled. “He’s coming here. If it’ll just take a moment, you can talk here.”

Harry wore a look of mock disappointment. “You don’t even trust me to meet with Jimmy alone?”

Albus inclined his head to look over his glasses at Harry. “And what happened the last time you met with Jimmy alone?”

“I memory charmed him and made it look like you did it,” Harry bashfully admitted.

“Mmm-hmm,” Albus said.

“What was that thing anyway?” Harry said pointing towards the Headmaster’s desk drawer.

Albus smiled mirthfully. “I’m not surprised you didn’t recognize it. It’s a way to contact and coordinate with the prefects and the Head Boy and Girl. The circles are each linked with a badge. I’ve instructed the Head Boy to come to my office and that it is not an emergency.”

“Hmph,” Harry chided. “I’ll have you know your counterpart felt I deserved the prefect badge but didn’t want to burden me with the whole prophecy and chosen one stuff already on my plate.”

Albus presented an almost genuine look of embarrassment. “My apologies. And the Head Boy?”

“You were dead by then,” Harry grinned victoriously. “Pity.”

Albus frowned when Harry stuck his tongue out at him.

“Headmaster?” Jimmy called out as he opened the office door.

“Come in, Mr. Potter, come in,” Albus urged.

Jimmy noticed the other person present. “Harry?”

“Hiya, Jimmy,” Harry greeted.

“What are you doing here?” Jimmy asked glancing between the Headmaster and Harry. “You didn’t do anything stupid, did you?”

Harry used a magical arm to flick his sort of brother in the ear. “Watch it.”

Jimmy swatted uselessly by his ear and turned to the Headmaster curiously.

Albus motioned towards Harry. “Lord Black wished to have a brief word with you.” Albus saw both Potters giving him the same look but he wasn’t going anywhere. “I feel the need to chaperone.”

Harry pulled out his Lookie Talkies and handed one to Jimmy. “I wanted to make sure you had a way to instantly contact me.”

Jimmy accepted the small mirror in confusion. “Thanks, Harry. Not that I don’t appreciate it but is there something I should know?”

“Excellent question,” Albus immediately responded. “Harry?”

“No,” Harry said with a glare at the Headmaster. “Nothing you should know. I’m just being cautious.”

“Cautious?” Jimmy repeated.

Harry shrugged. “Yeah, cautious.”

Albus looked at Harry and saw he was done. “Thank you, James. That will be all.”

“Headmaster,” Jimmy bid goodbye. “See you, Harry.”

“Oh Jimmy,” Harry suddenly recalled. “Do me a favor and please, please, don’t use that mirror to shave your balls.”

Jimmy looked at his half of the Lookie Talkie set again. “No worries. I doubt it’s sharp enough even if I wanted to.”

Harry waved goodbye as Jimmy disappeared out the door. Harry felt worry creep into his stomach. “He was just kidding, right?”

“I like to think so, but I wouldn’t bet the castle on it,” Albus grinned knowing the Head Boy’s appreciation for taking advantage of the stereotypes of Gryffindors.

Harry decided not to give it any further thought. “I’m going to go.”

“If I find anything noteworthy about the... *items*, shall I contact you?”

“Yeah,” Harry said in surprise. “I’d appreciate that. I’ve got some personal stuff kinda going on right now that I need to figure out, but I’ll be around.”

Albus carefully worded. “Is this ‘stuff’ the reason you’re feeling ‘cautious’?”

Harry nodded. “I just got a bad feeling. By giving Jimmy a mirror, now he’ll most likely never have an occasion to need to use it. But if I’d thought about it, and I’d not given him the mirror, then inevitably he would have needed it.”

Albus stroked his beard. “I knew a man who utilized similar logic. On the days that clear weather was especially important, he would always carry an umbrella, in hopes to stave off the rain. It worked for him twice.”

“See? Exactly,” Harry agreed.

Albus thinned his lips adding, “And then it rained for two years straight.”

Harry responded with the strongest logic in his arsenal. "You're a poohead too. Goodbye," Harry said as he left the office.

"Okay, what was that?" Sarah quietly asked when she felt they were out of earshot.

"What was what?" Lily replied in a whisper.

"Lord Black knows his way around Hogwarts better than you think," Sarah repeated in a deep and mocking voice.

"I don't sound like that," Lily scolded.

"That's debatable, but I meant the unspoken 'wink, wink, nudge, nudge' in your tone."

Lily sometimes forgot how observant her daughter was. "You know we all assumed the Lord Blacks never went to Hogwarts, right?"

"Yeah?"

Lily looked both ways before answering, "The way he expected the doors to open, that's a relatively common mistake. But it's common in graduates coming back to the castle for the first time. People with seven years experience of the doors opening for them."

Sarah looked over at her mum. "You think Harry went to Hogwarts?"

Lily walked into the Hog's Head as her daughter held the door open. "I don't see how we could have missed him, but yeah, I think he went to Hogwarts."

"He's younger than Tonks," Sarah replied. "Goodness knows she's been bragging about that enough. So did he change his name?"

Lily saw Gin Weasley behind the bar looking at her when the forward young woman loudly asked. "The usual?"

"Yeah, please," Lily and Sarah said as they dropped their cloaks onto the backs of their chairs.

"Like we'd ever risk anything else here," Sarah muttered quietly.

Lily smirked at her daughter. "I've heard some people rave about the Friday Fried Surprise."

"That's like calling Bertie Botts your favorite candy. You know what it is, don't you?"

Lily shook her head. "I thought it was a secret, hence the surprise."

"She just refries the leftovers from throughout the week. No two orders taste the same and she's not even sure what most of them are. That's the surprise."

"That's revolting," Lily calmly decided.

"That's bar food," Sarah assured her. "The idea is to get you drunk enough not to really look at what you're eating. And make the food salty enough that you need another drink."

"I'm beginning to think you're a little too familiar with bar room settings," Lily chided. "You know what they'll do to your skin."

"Oh please. The Hog's Head hardly counts as a bar. No one comes here looking to dance or looking to *dance*. And you never answered my question."

Lily took a moment to remember the question and frowned. "I don't want to spend all our time gossiping about Harry. I feel like we never get to talk anymore."

"Okay," Sarah readily agreed. "What's on your mind?"

Lily smiled back and opened her mouth, only to snap it shut a few seconds later. She opened her mouth again and began to make a hand gesture, before catching herself and closing her mouth once more. She came to a decision and was about to speak when Gin Weasley arrived with their order.

"Two beer nut salads," Gin announced settling down the large bowls. "And two house ales. Anything else?"

Sarah had already picked up her fork and answered, "Yeah. Do you know if Harry Black went to Hogwarts under a different name?"

Gin actually stumbled at the mix of the question and the oaths preventing her immediate response. "Huh?"

Lily was intrigued by the unexpected reaction. "This all looks wonderful, Gin. Thank you."

"My pleasure," Gin said with a nod.

"We were just about to gossip about the Lord Blacks. Care to join us?"

"We were, eh?" Sarah said grinning at her mum.

Lily nodded.

"Come on, Gin," Sarah urged. "I'll tell you all about how awkward Mum is around Harry."

"Okay," Gin said brimming with curiosity. She untied her apron and spun it around to her side. "Now what's this about Harry and awkward?"

Lily glared her daughter into silence and pounced on the new addition to their table. "Before we get into that, Miss Weasley, I think we need to have a talk about using permanent marker in improper ways on my son."

Gin Weasley looked at Sarah for help and gulped. "Yes, Mrs. Potter."

"Relax," Lily said with a grin. "I'm just having you on. I know it was Harry and Sirius who did that."

"Oh good," Gin said with a forced laugh. "You really had me going there, Mrs. Potter."

Sarah raised a curious eyebrow, wondering if her little brother's crush wasn't as unrequited as she first assumed.

Ginny saw both Potter women scrutinizing her and defiantly urged. "Were you saying something about Harry?"

Lily glared, every bit the mother thinking of her baby, and then nodded pleasantly. "He acts like he went to Hogwarts. But none of us recognize him or anyone similar."

"He probably would have gone around your time," Sarah said with a nod towards Gin. "Maybe a couple of years older, but he's younger than Tonks."

Gin tapped her chin, deep in thought. "You're thinking about Fred and George's year?"

"Anywhere around there," Sarah replied.

Gin was slowly shaking her head. "No, I can't think of any wizards fitting Harry's attitude and power."

"I have a wild theory," Lily offered.

"But," Gin interrupted, pointing a finger in the air and maintaining her perfectly stoic expression.

"Oh?" Lily perked up.

Gin began to slowly nod. "But there was this one witch."

"No," Sarah gaped, "way."

Lily furrowed her brow. "You think Harry's..."

"I don't know," Gin lied. "But there was that one witch who was always so quiet and really strong magically."

"I knew those eyelashes looked too good," Sarah cheered.

Lily frowned. "So are you implying he's a male who pretended to be female in school? Or a female pretending to be male now?"

"Well you know," Gin confided, "Auror Lupin is a Black by birth, so there's definitely a metamorph gift in the bloodline. Maybe Harry's..."

Gin shifted her hands as if testing imaginary weights. "A little from column A and a little from column B."

Sarah's face was momentarily stuck in mix of disbelief and disgust. She shook her head and turned to her mother. "Didn't you have a wild theory?"

"It somehow doesn't feel as wild as it did a moment ago," Lily said in bewilderment. "But considering it appears he went to Hogwarts and no one knows him, I thought that he might simply be a time traveler."

Gin shook an accusing finger. "That would actually explain the dual Lord Black thing."

Sarah gasped and pointed at her mother. "That's why you two get retarded around each other. He's like your great, great grandson from the future."

Gin tilted her head to look at Lily. "He does have your eyes."

"I noticed that," Lily uncomfortably admitted. "But I'm not so sure he's from the future."

"What are you saying?" Sarah asked curiously.

Lily took a deep breath before quietly conceding, "That I think he might be... could be... your real grandfather."

Sarah blinked, exclaiming loudly. "You think he's your dad?"

Gin was leaning off to her side, having a small coughing fit.

Lily shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. But he's fully aware of whatever's weird between us and I'm grasping at straws."

Sarah saw Gin wasn't going to be any help and inquired, "I didn't think you could travel to the future, only the past."

"Time turners only go to the past, but supposedly there are spells that can go anywhere. And besides you don't have to actually travel to reach the future," Lily said. "All it takes is a magical accident to put

you in a fifty year stasis, and in a blink of an eye, it's just like you traveled to the future."

Gin held up a hand after she'd composed herself. "Just to be clear, we're talking about the possibility that Harry is your dad, right?"

"Yes," Lily replied.

"Fantastic," Gin agreed helping herself to a sip of Sarah's ale.

Sarah was still shaking her head distressed at the possibility of dealing with a really hot grandfather. "What led you to this theory?"

Lily shrugged. "I don't know what Harry's hiding, but he takes every opportunity he can to hug me." Lily frowned as she admitted, "And he feels guilty about it."

"So like he missed out on raising you," Sarah concluded. "That's nuts."

Lily sighed. "Yeah, it is. But if you ever watch him, I mean *really* watch him, you'll see. He acts like he's woken up in a world that looks the same just all the people are brand new."

"Whoa," Gin was impressed. "Deep."

"This is great," Sarah sarcastically bit out while rubbing the bridge of her nose. "Either Harry is my grandfather or somewhere in the range of fifty to a hundred percent female."

Lily chuckled at the simplicity of the summation.

"I wouldn't say that," Gin disagreed.

"You got another theory?" Sarah looked up hopefully.

"No," Gin said with a bright grin. "I just meant that it's not either-or. He could be both."

"I've been thinking."

“And I’ve been drinking.”

Harry glared at his godfather. “Sirius, stop it.”

“I can drop it,” Sirius agreed.

Harry growled. “Do you really want me to set back your healing?”

“No,” Sirius pouted. “That prospect is not very appealing.” Sirius saw he was quickly nearing the ‘poke-in-the-eye’ level of irritation. “Perhaps if you were more revealing? Stop concealing that feeling? Okay I’m done, don’t hurt me.” Sirius had his arms up to protect himself and added, “Or send me reeling through the ceiling.”

Dobby snickered.

“Don’t laugh,” Harry warned the elf. “We don’t want to encourage this sort of behavior.”

Sirius grinned at the amused elf. “I’ve been doing a little thinking too, actually.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry looked up. “What have you been thinking?”

“I think,” Sirius said. “I think most people don’t really appreciate how much more complicated wiping is when you’re dealing with a hairy bum.”

“Padfoot,” Harry grumbled.

“I’m not kidding,” Sirius continued. “Girls especially can’t comprehend the dynamics necessary to-”

Harry cut him off with a silencing charm. “Dobby, you can stay or go, but if you stay please turn invisible. Sirius can’t seem to stop playing to an audience today.”

Dobby smiled and snapped his fingers disappearing from view.

Sirius had managed to break the silencing charm and pouted. “Fine, I’ve been thinking about the thing too.”

Harry looked emboldened. "And?"

"And I think if we're going to do something, we're better off sooner than later."

Harry nodded. "Me too. Albus will connect us with the burglaries real soon, if he hasn't already. Our options are just going to get more and more limited."

"You think?" Sirius wondered. "But we're always so slick about making the robberies all quiet and clever. You know, like the opposite of the loud, blunt, and obnoxious public image we've been cultivating."

"Cultivating?" Harry repeated. "You've just been yourself."

"Myself?" Sirius said, choking back the tears. "You don't think I wish I could stop hiding? Treating it like a disease, just because I want to be a dancer?" Sirius did a pirouette and nearly lost his balance.

Harry looked away tiredly. "Padfoot, Dobby's not even listening to you."

Sirius snickered. "Sure he is. I can hear him laughing in the corner."

"Sorry," the invisible elf's voice carried from the corner.

"Invisible and silent, if you stay," Harry said loudly. A snap of elven fingers was the only response Harry received.

"What'll Albus do when he figures it out?" Sirius asked returning to more earnest conversation.

Harry frowned. "Probably not much. He won't approve, but with a supposed greater good of checking Death Eater homes for horcruxes, he'll understand. I'm more concerned with the mystery note fucker."

"Yeah?" Sirius urged Harry to continue.

"He wanted us to get the note with the fake diary," Harry summarized. "Now he may think we got the note and aren't jumping to meet him

but he'll probably have to assume that we didn't get it. In which case, he either will leave notes at other horcrux locations -locations we don't know- or he'll try and contact us another way."

"You're not thinking of actually going to the Shrieking Shack?"

"Definitely not," Harry said. "We both need to stay away from there."

"You think we should just wait for him to contact us again?"

Harry bit his lip uncertainly. "Actually, I'm thinking we force him to come to us on our terms."

Sirius perked up. "You think he'll do that?"

Harry warily argued, "I think he'll have to. He can't be certain we got the letter. And if he doesn't show, then it proves his claims of cooperation and an alliance were disingenuous."

"Drawbacks?"

Harry let out a tired breath. "What I'm thinking will clearly alert the Dark Lord that his horcruxes aren't safe."

"He's probably heard about Malfoy's floor vault," Sirius pointed out. "And I doubt he missed the fires from Grindelwald's old bunker either."

"Yeah, I mean I'm almost certain he knows," Harry agreed. "But this will move us up his 'to-kill-painfully' list."

"What are you saying we should do exactly?"

Harry's face was grim as he explained. "Set our own trap with live bait."

"Live? How live?"

"I say we hold a private auction, by invitation only for Ravenclaw's cube, Slytherin's locket, and Hufflepuff's cup."

Sirius' eyes widened in shock. "And just who would we be inviting? I'm doubting an owl to That Fucker will reach him."

Harry shook his head with a smirk. "We're not inviting a single person. We just want the people who'd be crashing this party."

"Yes," Sirius agreed with a manic look in his eyes. "Yes, crashing this party... *of doom!*"

"What?" Harry was perturbed.

Sirius motioned exaggeratedly. "I thought we were trying to add a little flair to our conversation."

Harry sighed. "Dobby? You have to leave the room. I'm sorry. And Sirius? Stop playing to an audience."

Sirius realized Harry wasn't acting overdramatic, he simply was overdramatic. Sirius saw Harry looked pretty determined too. "So the only people who will understand what we're auctioning are Voldemort and our mystery fucker?"

"Dumbledore will too."

Sirius couldn't think of any better ideas. "You know this may well mark the end of the Death Eater Bandits."

Harry nodded. "With half the horcruxes, we have more to lose than we do to gain by continuing. The ward sets have been getting nastier because they know we're coming."

Sirius nodded having thought similar things. "But we can still make exceptions when opportunities present themselves, right?"

"Absolutely," Harry agreed. "And you know, someday in the future, there will be people, who desperately need to be robbed. And they may not have any tattoos on their arms."

Sirius smiled happily, picturing a bright future. "Very well then," Sirius said as though coming to a grand conclusion. "Let's just see who is

interested in,” Sirius snapped his head to face Harry, “buying some of this dark bastard’s soul!”

“Oh for Merlin’s sake,” Harry grumbled rubbing his temples as a headache formed. “You’ve got no audience! Why are you doing this?”

Sirius stood up challengingly. “You’re my audience.”

“It’s my idea,” Harry pointed out.

“Yeah but,” Sirius argued. “But you’re not really saying it with any... panache.”

Harry watched his godfather wiggle his hips and began to wonder if Sirius really did want to become a dancer. “You’re an idiot.”

“No, you’re an idiot,” Sirius petulantly retorted. “And a drama queen.”

Harry looked up dangerously. “Excuse me?”

“Ah-ha,” Sirius exclaimed pointing at Harry. “See?”

Harry fought the urge to huff. “You’re a poohead.”

“No, you’re the poohead, poohead.”

Harry stopped a beat unsure how to reply to that one. “Are we done now?”

“Yeah, we’re done,” Sirius agreed. “Poohead.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black

in accordance with

GRINGOTTS of LONDON

on the 24th of May at 8:00 PM will be holding a PRIVATE auction of three distinct and separate lots.

Attendance by Invitation Only

LOT 1 - ***Ravenclaw's Cube***: A personal project of the intelligent founder of Hogwarts, Rowena Ravenclaw's cube paved the way for the creation of the modern pensieve. This cube is believed to be the first man-made device capable of holding memories.

LOT 2 - ***Slytherin's Locket***: The personal talisman Salazar Slytherin wore around his neck in the years after banishment from Hogwarts. Rumored to possess secret powers, the efficacy of the magic of the locket is not guaranteed by Gringotts.

LOT 3 - ***Hufflepuff's Cup***: This ancient chalice was used by the kind-hearted founder to administer potions in the very first incarnation of the Hogwarts' hospital wing. It is unknown how long the cup has been in the Hufflepuff family, but it predates Helga Hufflepuff herself by at least six centuries.

Gringotts of London affirms and certifies the authenticity of all lots as announced.

If you believe you have received an invitation in error or did not receive an invitation you should have, please direct your questions and concerns to Gringotts. Ask for Bloodthrust.

"Bloodthrust?" Lawson questioned from behind his Death Eater mask.
"A goblin is running this?"

"Yeah," Cavanagh said pointing at the formal announcement in the legal notices section of the Daily Prophet. "Check it out. They even

included a picture of the goblin. I'm not sure, but I think it might be smiling."

Lawson flinched at the gruesome winking visage. "Have you informed our Lord?"

"Are you kidding?" Cavanagh scoffed. "I've been around too long to fall for that one."

Lawson frowned. "Does he not know yet? He's going to want his ancestor's locket."

A sudden and violent shout pierced the air right before both men felt the tattoos on their arms burn.

Cavanagh winced. "I think it's safe to say he knows."

Cavanagh and Lawson hurried in behind Simmons to their Master's chambers and found Jugson and the Dark Lord awaiting them. They could all feel the anger rolling off the Dark Lord and as he crumpled a scorched copy of the Daily Prophet in his left hand.

"Spread the word," Voldemort instructed as the three newcomers bowed and waited attentively. "It's open season on all Blacks."

Cavanagh looked his Master in the eye and was quickly reminded of his place as the Dark Lord shredded his meager mental shields and implanted a series of visual locations. Cavanagh forced his eyes closed as he tore his gaze away.

Voldemort's breathing quieted as he ordered. "You are to check those sites, but touch nothing. Understood?"

Cavanagh mutely nodded. He took careful measured steps as he left the room, still dazed from the rough mental intrusion.

"Lawson," Voldemort whispered dangerously. "You are to follow Cavanagh but do not interfere. He may pick up other tails, so make sure you are undetected. If he is killed or captured, you are to report immediately to me. Do not assist him. Understood?"

Lawson nodded firmly.

“Do not fail me.” The Dark Lord turned to Simmons, indicating Lawson was dismissed. “Simmons. You are to find out everything you can about the auction in three days. I expect a full report by this evening.”

Simmons nodded and briskly left the room, leaving Jugson alone with the Dark Lord.

“Your arm,” Voldemort demanded as he twirled the wand in his hand.

Jugson pushed his sleeve up again, revealing the Dark Mark. He grimaced but made no other movement as his arm burned and the Dark Lord’s magic was channeled through the Mark.

Voldemort smiled at Jugson’s obedience. “Lucius is on his way. Open a line of communication with our contact at Hogwarts. I have a special plan that will require a few of our allies.”

Jugson perked up at the mention of allies and a wide smile grew across his face. “I look forward to it, my Lord.”

Voldemort scowled, angry at himself more than anything. He had managed to underestimate the Lord Blacks again. He wondered briefly if he had been too hasty in assuming they had nothing to do with the biggest thorn in his side.

“That fucker!”

“Don’t you mean-”

“*Those* fuckers!”

Alan Weston winced. He knew he was going to be the bearer of bad news as soon as he saw the auction announcement.

“I cannot believe they would do this,” the wizard ranted as he reread the legal notices section at the start of the Daily Prophet classifieds. “Auctioning off the Dark Lord’s soul? That’s madness.”

"It is a bit nutty," Alan agreed.

The mysterious wizard was pacing across the room. "They have to know the only people who matter will see it's nothing but a trap."

"Oh right," Alan agreed.

"There's got to be more to this," the wizard concluded as he settled into an immaculate armchair. He looked over the paper again seeking out clues.

Alan recognized the other wizard's expression when everything slid into place. "What is it?"

"This isn't about Voldemort, this is about me," the wizard in black explained ruefully. "I did not see this coming. It's every bit as stupid as it is cunning."

"I take it we have them to thank for Malfoy's weeklong barbecue?"

"They got my note." The man nodded with certainty. He considered his options. "They're forcing me to attack a certain trap, look like a scared liar, or show up and play nice on their turf by their rules."

Alan frowned. "I'm guessing option one is out and two isn't really your style."

"No," the wizard said. "We're definitely going and playing nice. We have to."

"We?"

The man nodded as he poured himself some brandy. "This is too immense an opportunity to pass up even if they are forcing our hand."

"It is?"

"Did you not notice? There are three objects in the auction." He took a sip and saw Alan's look of confusion. "Unless I've misjudged the Blacks further, those three will complete the collection. And while they've announced it with the subtlety of a nesting dragon, it still is

two weeks until the full moon, which is the soonest Voldemort could even attempt making another.”

Alan blinked in shock.

The wizard smirked. “Even if he could, I doubt he’d succeed on his first try. His soul is too fractured.”

Alan was watching the other man desperately. “Are you saying...?”

“Yes,” the man in black slowly agreed. He took another sip. “Those fuckers have started the clock.”

“My clock’s stopped.”

Albus picked up the magical device on the corner of his desk. He looked in a gap at the top curiously. “Is that...?” Albus took a careful sniff and jerked the clock away. “It smells like the owls. Fawkes, do you know if the pooping owl is back again?”

Fawkes let out a chirp of annoyance before he realized he had shifted in his sleep and was about to fall from his perch.

“I’ve apologized numerous times,” Albus assured the phoenix. “I never should have accused you of defecating on my desk.”

Fawkes let out a stream of soft chirping as he waddled his way back to the center of the perch.

“Something in today’s paper, you say?” Albus asked in surprise. He picked up the lifestyle and sports sections he had discarded earlier.

Fawkes was about to settle back into the middle of his perch when he realized the balance felt off.

Albus’ eyes lost their twinkle as he read through the auction announcement several times. “I don’t understand it, Fawkes. Why would Harry do this? What could they possibly gain from this auction?”

The bird gave up on figuring out what was wrong with the balance and sat back down, facing Albus. He chirped a little wondering why his tail feathers itched.

“No,” Albus disagreed. “It’s not about the money. I’m almost certain. This is... this is... kicking a hornets’ nest to see if there are any hornets? Or to see if they will attack?”

Fawkes tilted his head, stretching out the kinks in his neck.

“You’re right, of course,” Albus said with a nod. “This is why the Lupins both took the next few days off from work. Harry and Sirius have clearly put some thought into this, even if we cannot divine their motivation.”

Fawkes wiggled his bottom half as he slid back into a flatter position on his perch.

“Do you really think so?”

Fawkes let out a small chirp as the cold metal of the perch startled him on his sensitive under feathers.

“I know, my friend,” Albus smiled at the phoenix. “I should have some faith in them. They are no doubt under an immense amount of charms and wards. And they are protecting the other Blacks, so they have a plan.”

Fawkes let out several more chirps as his own body heat was countering the chilly metal he rested upon.

“My goodness, you’re right,” Albus gasped. “They don’t... Harry never... Oh dear. Harry has no idea that Voldemort has made the Potter connection and is aware Harry and Sirius are not native to this world. This is no good.”

Fawkes warbled quietly, wishing Albus wasn’t so chatty today. He lifted his right wing before folding it back under in a more comfortable position.

Albus turned to the wall Fawkes pointed at. "The chocolate frog cards! You're a genius, Fawkes."

Fawkes closed his eyes and decided it was nap time.

Albus began digging into his pockets until he located his chocolate frog card. "Remus Lupin!" he clearly stated towards the small magical portrait of himself.

The surface of the card blurred and darkened, ending with only an inky color. "Albus?"

"Yes, Remus," Albus answered feeling perturbed. "I cannot see you. Can you see me?"

"No," Remus replied. "I know Harry's warded this place to high heaven. Let me ask him."

"What?" Harry's muffled voice could be barely heard. "You can hear him?"

Albus patiently listened as Remus and Harry were talking on the other side of the connection.

"What about now?" Harry distantly yelled.

"No change," Remus' voice replied. "Shouldn't you be taking some of the wards down, not putting more up?"

"What about now?"

"No," Remus shouted back. He leaned closer and clearly said, "I'm sorry about this, Albus."

"Quite alright," Albus replied. "These things happen."

"This should do it," Harry's far off cry was the last thing Albus heard before the black surface disappeared and the chocolate frog card returned to its inert state.

The holographic portrait of himself smiled and waved up at him.

Albus frowned. "You're mocking me, aren't you?"

The small picture responded by grabbing the bottom of his beard and feeding it into his own ear. After two fistfuls had been pushed in, the tip of the beard emerged out of his ear on the other side. The chocolate frog card proceeded to tug his beard left and right through his own supposedly empty head.

Albus picked the card up and spoke clearly into it again. "Remus Lupin!" After a few seconds of nothing happening, he intoned, "Tonks Lupin!"

Again there was no response, so Albus tried, "Nymphadora Lupin? Nymphadora Tonks Lupin? Auror Lupin? Auror Tonks Lupin?" Albus sighed as he was forced to accept the fact that Harry had not been adjusting his wards so they could communicate better. "That bloody annoying bastard."

The surface of the chocolate frog card darkened to blackness. The illusion of creamy off-white smoke billowed out revealing the worried face of Severus Snape. "What is it, Headmaster?"

Albus blinked. "My apologies, Severus. I did not mean to call you."

Severus was a little worried at the rare surprised look on Albus' face. "I shall return to my class."

Albus just nodded, deactivating the chocolate frog card. "I'll need to watch what I say around you."

The holographic picture just nodded as Albus stuffed the card back into one of his pockets.

Albus looked over and saw Fawkes staring at him. "They are most likely under a Fidelius charm and beyond a post owl's reach. I could ask to borrow Mr. Potter's mirror but I suspect that would upset Harry."

Fawkes doubted Albus would ever let him get any sleep and flew over to his desk, intending to express his displeasure in a way that would ruin the mystery of the pooping owl.

Albus watched the large avian lift its leg and exclaimed. "Of course! You can reach him still!"

Fawkes was startled and couldn't stop himself fast enough. He saw his pet human was engrossed in penning a short note. Fawkes took the opportunity to drag Albus' hat in small unnoticed steps, until he'd fully covered up the small accident.

Albus read through the note a second time and nodded. He folded it up and sealed the envelope with a tap of his wand. "Can you get this to Harry?"

Fawkes figured if he was going to get any sleep, he should just take the note and not put up a fight. He grabbed it in his beak and disappeared in a flash of fire.

Albus relaxed when he saw Fawkes return and settle right back into his favorite position on the perch. He decided he should warn the Minister and DMLE to be especially alert for the next few days. He stood up and turned to the large portrait of a fourteenth century Headmaster. "I believe we should prepare Hogwarts defenses."

"Wise move, Headmaster," the portrait agreed as it swung open revealing a darkened room. "Do you think they know what they are doing?"

"Let us hope so."

"Stop! Stop! You have no idea what you're doing."

Harry pulled his wand back from the portrait's surface. "I don't see you giving me any ideas."

The irate portrait of Lord Eugene Simmons growled at Harry. "I don't know the first thing about manipulating portraits and I certainly wouldn't tell you if I did."

"Please?" Harry asked hopefully.

The portrait just stared at Harry in disgust.

“Hence,” Harry grinned pushing his wand onto the nameplate at the bottom of the frame. “Trial and error.”

“Be honest, Harry.” Sirius chided from the other side of the room.

“Okay,” Harry agreed. “Error and error.” He sent a burst of barely-formed magic into the portrait’s frame.

The magic soaked into the carved wood, visibly flowing up the top and then cascading back down.

Harry thought he may have stumbled across something when the magic reached the nameplate at the base again and spewed fire at him, catching his sleeve. “Ahh!” he shouted as he tried to rub the small flames out. He was rubbing furiously, making little headway, when his flailing arms caught a wingback chair on fire.

Harry’s wits finally came back to him and he was about to squelch the fire when he was blasted into the wall by massive stream of water from Sirius’ fire hose charm.

Sirius was swinging his arm back and forth between Harry and the chair. Both were completely drenched and the fire was out, but Harry made girlish yelps every time the stream pinned him against the wall.

The fire hose charm failed when Sirius was flipped in the air and dangling by his ankle. “Harry,” he whined before falling the short distance back to the ground.

“Uhh,” Harry wheezed after having the wind knocked out of him by the overzealous fire-fighting.

“Oww,” Sirius groaned after landing on his tailbone.

The mocking laughter of Lord Simmons reminded them they were not alone.

“What are you laughing at?” Harry grumbled as he took off his soggy robe.

Lord Simmons looked down from his frame. "I'm laughing at a pair of morons."

"Laugh it up," Sirius said standing as he rubbed his sore bum. "Then remember your families have been exposed as Death Eater scum and we took all your good shit."

A cacophony of angry ranting started cascading in from all directions.

"Nice, Padfoot."

"Sorry, Harry," Sirius said as they left the room filled with angry shouting portraits. "Our master plan of a giant portrait spy network isn't quite ready for the world."

Harry shrugged. "I figured since we were in lockdown, I might as well work on something."

He wrung his dripping robe out, before remembering Fawkes had interrupted him earlier. He dug into his robe pocket and pulled out a scorched and blurry ink-stained envelope. He tried to open the letter and just tore the soggy parchment. "Great. You ruined it."

"Don't blame me," Sirius defended. "That thing is more burnt than wet. What'd it say anyway?"

"Albus was calling us foolish and trying to talk us out of the auction, no doubt."

"No doubt?"

"I hadn't read it yet, but I think we can both guess most of it."

Sirius scratched his chin. "You think maybe he was trying to bid?"

Harry just looked at his godfather.

"Yeah, didn't think so," Sirius agreed. "So I got the portkey working on the display case."

"Oh yeah?"

Sirius nodded. "Magic detection is still finicky. But I got bored and figured we should entertain our prisoners."

"Guests, Sirius," Harry corrected. "They're called guests."

"What are you doing?" Remus questioned when he saw Tonks using the tip of her wand to dig into the surface of the kitchen table.

Tonks didn't even look up. "I'm counting the days we're imprisoned here since time has lost all meaning."

"It's not that bad," Remus reminded his adopted daughter.

Tonks kept scraping and pouted, "Have you even been listening to what they're talking about?"

Remus gave his daughter a gentle pat on the back as he turned to hear the ghost of Ginny Weasley shriek as powerfully as her mother.

"How can you joke about domestic abuse? Battered women are—"

"I'm not talking about women," Sirius interrupted the ghost. "I'm talking about men."

"Well the men probably deserved it," Bellatrix argued, belatedly noticing Remus and Tonks were also paying attention. She was dipping a large pickle into a jar of peanut butter and snapping off progressively louder bites. "I know most women do."

Tonks glanced at her father before asking Bellatrix, "You really don't know how normal people live, do you?"

Bellatrix dunked another pickle and looked to Harry and Sirius for help. "Most people don't deserve to be abused? Really?"

The two Lupins, two Lord Blacks, and ghost all looked at the woman pitifully.

"Huh," Bellatrix considered while stirring up her peanut butter. "That doesn't sound right at all."

“Anyway,” Ginny said trying to get back on topic. “What were we talking about?”

“How clueless Harry is when it comes to women,” Bellatrix reminded.

“I’m not clueless,” Harry argued. “I know the important stuff.”

Sirius nodded. “I taught him the twenty-seven primary and secondary erogenous zones.”

“Is it still twenty-seven?” Remus sought a definitive answer.

“I don’t think the female body has evolved recently,” Harry said doubtfully.

Sirius shrugged. “Yeah, well, my astronomy professor told me Pluto was a planet and I didn’t think *that* would change either.”

Tonks turned to her dad and explained, “I know how unlikely it is that stupid has suddenly become contagious, but I’m just not sure it’s worth risking.”

“Be nice,” he scolded with a smile.

Harry jumped up and was patting down the various pockets of his cloak, before locating the warm buzzing Lookie Talkie. The image on the handheld mirror faded away revealing Jimmy’s frantic face. “Harry! Thank Merlin you’re there!”

“Jimmy? What’s happened?”

“Hogwarts is in lockdown because there was some sort of attack, but I can’t reach Dad who never takes his auror bracelet off and I heard them talking to Mum about Potters and Sarah was in Hogsmeade and then the Headmaster-”

“Whoa! Whoa,” Harry said. “Take a breath. Are you under attack right now?”

Jimmy shook his head and calmly summarized. "I'm in my room. The floo system is down. Hogwarts is surrounded by a giant dome that even blocks the secret passages."

"When did you last hear from your Dad?"

"This morning. He had to go to Malfoy Manor."

"Shit." Harry succinctly replied. "We're coming."

"Get Sarah. She was in Hogsmeade when the dome went up," Jimmy urged before deactivating his mirror. "I think this attack may be targeted at us."

Harry clicked off his Lookie Talkie and saw everyone looking at him. "Shit."

All traces of annoyance gone, Tonks was focused and ready. "Ministry?"

"Go ahead," Harry said. "But be careful and plan to come back here."

Tonks apparating away snapped Remus out of his thoughtful daze. "This is your fault."

"Yeah, it is," Harry agreed. "And now we need to fix it. Sirius?"

"Just bloody perfect," Sirius exclaimed knowing what he had to do. "I'm going solo. I don't trust apparating more than him with me."

"I'll hit Hogsmeade and see if I can find a trail," Harry agreed. "Be careful."

Sirius popped up to his room to get his gear.

"Bellatrix," Harry said. "You are not to leave these wards unless in imminent danger."

Bellatrix nodded figuring as much.

Harry winced at the look Remus was giving him. "Your chocolate frog will probably be ringing off the hook as soon as you leave these wards. But you mind doing me a favor first?"

Remus nodded but had questions of his own. "Where'd Sirius go?"

"He's gearing up before going to Malfoy Manor."

"What?"

Harry glanced at Bellatrix. "Earmuffs?"

She obediently put the peanut butter covered pickle into her mouth and covered both of her ears with her hands.

Harry turned to Remus and explained, "Sirius is still keyed into the wards at Malfoy Manor. Odds are James is trapped in a hidden dungeon, and Sirius is going to break him out."

Remus didn't want to blame Harry and Sirius for this but was failing to find reasons not to. "What makes you so sure he's still alive?"

Harry took a deep breath and saw Bellatrix was still keeping her ears covered. "Because Voldemort's planning on bidding with the lives of Potters." Harry closed his eyes as he let his magical arms out, flailing them around to taste and sense the air.

"What favor did you need?" Remus asked as he felt Harry's magic emanating around him and knew he was about to leave.

"Floo, owl, visit, or somehow check on Lord Peter Potter," Harry said calmly with his eyes shut. "Maybe get him and any other Potters to Hogwarts, if they want. Something."

"I'll check on him," Remus assured Harry.

"Thank you." Harry's eyes snapped opened. "Be careful."

With a soft pop, Harry reappeared at the primary apparition point in Hogsmeade. He waited a second ensuring Ginny's ghostly form hadn't stayed visible. Witches were herding young children out of the

streets and people were taking cover, peering out storefront doors and windows.

Harry spotted smoke in the distance and attempted to apparate down the lane. He flickered right back into place and felt the echoing thump of anti-apparition wards in his head. He quickly broke into a run towards the fire.

Ducking under a spell, Harry slid to a stop and turned towards the caster. Another spell crashed right into a magical shield as he raised it. He located a lone Death Eater hiding in the shadows and began a brisk walk up to the man. "Not under orders to leave me alone?"

"*Avada Kedavra!*" the masked man shouted.

Harry whipped a small rock right up into the path of the killing curse as two other magical arms grabbed the Death Eater and bodily yanked him into the street.

He was fighting against the forces suspending him in air and nearly had his wand aimed at Harry. "*Sapi-*"

"Stop that." Harry calmly twisted the man's wrist and effortlessly ripped the wand from his hand. The wand floated into one of Harry's pockets as he held the man up. "Where is she?"

The man was struggling in Harry's arms, and whipping his head side to side to avoid Harry's gaze.

Both of the Death Eater's arms snapped, broken at the elbow, and he screamed in pain. Harry again asked, "Where is she?"

The man stopped shrieking but was still fighting Harry's grip. "You're too late. By now she-"

A massive explosion blew out the front door of Madam Puddifoot's and several shouts of distress could be heard.

Harry stunned the Death Eater before he could say anything else. From what the Death Eater was saying and the sound of fighting, Harry deduced Sarah was still in Hogsmeade, which meant keeping

her here became priority. He knew altering the current portkey and apparition wards would take too long, so he quickly cast some of his own and tied them into an anchor stone he'd driven into the ground. He stunned the Death Eater once more and hid the anchor under his unconscious body.

Two more Death Eaters came out of Madam Puddifoot's and Harry charged straight for them. Neither got a shield up in time, but the one on the left managed to yell, "It's Black!" before his head hit the wall knocking him out cold.

"Go get him!" was shouted from the back of the tea shop just before a stream of better than a dozen Death Eaters came flowing to the front. Shields were up and the curses began to rain down.

Harry let an unconscious Death Eater serve as his human shield, taking the brunt of the curses headed his direction. He was about charge headfirst into the fray when his ears caught the sounds of fighting coming from the back.

"Help!"

Harry decided a change in tactics was needed once he knew she was okay and roughly her location. He launched the mangled corpse towards the largest pack of Death Eaters and ran out the front door.

Four more Death Eaters were waiting in the street and began firing uncoordinatedly. Harry returned their curses with several of his own, putting them on the defensive and knocking out one.

An invisible arm yanked the wrist of a Death Eater sending his curse directly into the face of his comrade. Another invisible arm grabbed the unconscious Death Eater by the ankle and dragged him behind Harry, as he circled around to the back of the building.

The rear door was charmed to not open, but four simultaneous well-placed punches proved the same could not be said for the door's frame.

Harry again let an unconscious floating Death Eater lead his way. Spells tore apart the robed shield, giving away the attackers'

locations. Harry deftly knocked out the two Death Eaters in the back room and pocketed their wands too.

“Help!” Sarah shrieked from the next room.

Harry dropped the smoldering body and barreled his way through the side door. Two stunners took out the Death Eaters furthest from him, while a massive man had a handful of Sarah Potter’s hair. She was unsuccessfully struggling to free herself.

The near giant whipped his head around faster than should be possible for a man his size. “You!”

Harry’s eyes quickly determined there were no other immediate threats and he answered, “Me.” A sharp crack erupted as the Death Eater’s head spun around to face the other way. His body went limp and he fell forward with a loud thump.

Sarah scrambled away from the ogre’s body to retrieve her wand. She looked warily at his eyes, frozen open behind the Death Eater mask. “You killed him?”

Harry was feeling slightly exhausted already and saw an opportunity. “Don’t move,” Harry instructed as he positioned himself right next to her. Four anchor stones floated in the air chest high, making a perfect square.

Harry held his wand perpendicular to the floor in the exact center of the square just as Death Eaters appeared at both doors. “*Fidelio!*”

Magic erupted into a flat plane rushing into the stones and sending magical walls growing until they met the floor and the ceiling.

All the Death Eaters that had been watching what was happening cried out in pain and clenched their eyes shut.

Sarah saw Harry relax and hunch forward, resting his hands on his knees as he caught his breath. She saw more and more Death Eaters come into the room, none of which seemed capable of locating them. She saw the magic slowly flowing up and down from

the four stones, flickering intermittently between solid and a hazy opaque veil. "What is this?"

"Don't touch it, please," Harry warned when he saw Sarah was mesmerized by the look of the magic on this side. He stood up and pulled out a pair of pepper-up potions. He swallowed one dose and held out the other to her. "Pepper-up?"

Sarah accepted the potion gratefully, realizing she could take a moment to heal her ankle and numb some of her bruises.

Harry smiled as steam trickled out his ears. "This is a spell I made. Well, a friend of mine helped me but mostly I made it. I call it a Fidelius cage."

"How's it work?" Sarah asked as she trailed her wand over a cut on Harry's cheek.

Harry appreciated the quick heal and smiled at her intellectual curiosity. "It's sort of an unfinished Fidelius charm, without a secret let alone a keeper."

Sarah was impressed. "From what little I know that shouldn't be possible."

"Technically, this Fidelius only covers the thin layer of magic and not the space in between. That's why I was able to eliminate the secret keeping aspects. The spell inevitably fails because there's no capping the anchors. But as long as I keep feeding it a little magic, it keeps trying to complete the charm, protecting us in a place that can only be accessed from below and above."

She was watching the magic flowing out of view into the floor and ceiling. "How long can you keep it up?" Sarah blushed when Harry bit back a snort. "The spell, you pervert."

Harry saw the majority of the Death Eaters were still in the room, trying to locate them. "Not indefinitely, so how about we put off the rest of this discussion until later and get ready to bust our way out of here?"

“Right,” Sarah agreed, before paling at the sheer number of Death Eaters currently in the room. “I don’t suppose you can move the cage with us?”

Harry shook his head. “Sorry. A mobile Fidelius is still beyond me. But I have ideas on how to anchor one to the moon instead of the Earth.”

“Could that help us here?”

“No.”

“Then let’s table that discussion too,” Sarah urged, noticing more men coming back into the room. “You think we’re going to get out of here?”

Harry saw there had to be two dozen men crammed in the small room and immediately beyond the doors. Harry grinned dangerously. “There’s no doubt in my mind we’re getting out of here. I’m just not sure how many of them will.” Harry noticed Sarah frowning. “You know what they were going to do to you, right?”

Sarah swallowed to hide the lump in her throat. “I have a fair idea.”

“Good. Because I’m feeling violent.”

Sarah knew that feeling well, experiencing it at least once a month. “I just want to get out of here.”

Harry nodded towards the door he’d burst through. “That way’s shorter, but they’ve probably got a welcoming party waiting around the corner. I say we go through the front and if we happen to destroy a fair amount of this god forsaken place, then so be it.”

Sarah thought Harry looked a little too eager. “It’s a tea shop.”

“It’s a tool of dark witches,” Harry argued.

“Discussion? Later?” Sarah reminded pointing towards the Death Eaters who appeared to be attempting group scrying in a more coordinated manner.

“Right,” Harry agreed. “Okay, you? Stay behind me and stay out of my way.”

“I can help,” Sarah argued.

“You want to help?” Harry said taking a deep breath and getting back into the right mindset. “Stun anyone moaning in pain. The whiners really grate on my nerves. Ready?”

Sarah nodded and Harry turned his back to her. He prepared two magical arms while four others gently gripped the cage’s anchor stones. “Stay close. And don’t fight me when I push and pull you around.”

Sirius apparated into the ward room at Malfoy Manor. He chose there because it was the place he knew best that was not currently a raging inferno. He called for Kreacher and stunned the elf immediately.

He tightened his outer chameleon cloak and disillusioned himself. He’d taken barely three steps, when he heard voices approaching. Sirius just held his breath and didn’t move from the wall. He kept a shield on the tip of his tongue as two masked Death Eaters scurried by wondering, “Why the hell would they need reinforcements to grab the girl?”

Sirius silently thanked his godson and crept down the hall. He was fortunate that he and Harry had dissected the entire manor layout, so he knew where the secret passage to the dungeon was.

He snuck a glance into the drawing room spewing fire out the roof and couldn’t stop grinning. The room was luckily empty as Sirius scampered across the hall into a living room with a six meter high mirror. Sirius shook his head at how fitting that was and hurried over to the grandfather clock.

Sirius pulled out his omnioculars and swore at the volume of wards covering the secret entrance behind the clock. There was no way he could get through that door without drawing a ton of notice even if he did have the Dark Mark. He twisted a couple of knobs on the omnioculars and grinned in delight at the obvious oversight.

After double-checking there was no one in the hallway headed this way, Sirius ran over to the wall just to the side of the door and pushed an illusory pin into the ground. He cast the spell storing the current appearance as the illusion he wanted before deactivating the pin. Silencing spells were rotated with blasting curses until Sirius had made his own secret tunnel.

Sirius crawled into his new hole and reactivated the illusory pin behind him. He carefully finished his tunnel ending on the fifth step from the top. After ensuring the coast was clear, Sirius vanished the debris. He pushed a second illusory pin into the ground ten steps further down. After storing the image, Sirius deactivated the pin and moved to right in front of his new wand-crafted hole. Reactivating the pin, the hole disappeared and the wall looked similar but not flawless.

Sirius knew it'd have to do, as he cleaned the dust from his disillusioned form and took the long curving flight of stairs two at a time. He slowed down as he heard a voice in the distance.

A scream of pain alerted Sirius to the fact that this wasn't a friendly chat.

"You liked that, didn't you?" Lucius Malfoy grinned in sadistic glee. "They say that one feels like rusty knives cutting across your body. Is it true? Is that what it felt like?"

Sirius didn't notice any other Death Eaters, but kept his wand ready in his wrist holster. He quietly grabbed a shovel as he snuck up to Lucius and swung it with all his might.

Lucius turned just in time to catch the shovel with his face. The blonde's nose was smashed flat and he was unconscious before he hit the floor.

"They say that one feels like a shovel to the face," Sirius said tossing the shovel onto the ground.

"Nngh!" was the extent of the warning James Potter could shout in his condition.

Sirius was ready and dove out of the way of a purple hex and sent back two of his own. The Death Eater that had been in the room, rushed forward and took cover right next to the door frame.

Sirius didn't even hesitate as he sent a blasting curse into the wall by the door. The stone exploded the Death Eater into the open and covered him in rubble as Sirius nailed him in the face with a vicious stunner.

"Anybody else?" Sirius asked, eyeing the blind corner warily.

"Nnh," James replied.

Sirius canceled the disillusionment on his cloak as he took in the full sight of the Assistant Director of the DMLE. James Potter was hurt pretty bad, hanging by his wrists, exposing his bruised and bloodied abdomen. He had a cut by his neck, and one eye swollen shut. Sirius sent a cutting curse at the chains and James fell to the floor.

"Oww," he groaned at the sudden jolt on his injuries.

"Sorry," Sirius said, not really sounding like it. He helped James remove the shackles and steadied the man as he struggled to his feet. James took a few tentative steps on his own while Sirius stunned the Death Eater again. "Damn. Broke his wand."

"I'll use Malfoy's," James said as he made his way over to the unconscious man. He accidentally kicked Lucius in the balls eight times as he stood up with the man's wand. He numbed most of his bruises and applied a little basic field healing. He attempted to stun Malfoy only to get the spell reflected back. "Shit," James swore as he ducked.

"Try the shovel," Sirius cheerfully suggested.

James looked at the wand uncertainly. "You think he jinxed his wand?"

"Maybe," Sirius admitted, "But you did heal yourself. And I do know that Lord Malfoy, in Malfoy Manor, wearing the Malfoy ring, has some protection from direct magic."

James looked over at Sirius and stared for a moment. "It really is you, isn't it?"

"A thank you wouldn't be out of place," Sirius grumbled.

James took a couple of slow steps forward and offered his hand.

Sirius thought it was kind of a goofy feminine gesture but shook hands. "Sirius Black."

"Thank you, Sirius Black," James said earnestly. "Now, how long until backup arrives? Are we waiting on a signal or something?"

Sirius forced a weak smile. "No signal, no backup. Just me. And we need to hurry before they notice us."

"Just... you?" James clarified.

Sirius frowned. "I'm not really feeling the love here."

James was confused. "Why are you doing this?"

Sirius huffed. "Lily promised herself to me. Now can we go?"

"This is not the time for your jokes."

"This is the perfect time for my jokes!"

Lucius groaned in discomfort as he slowly regained consciousness. "What... what happened?"

Sirius had already picked up the shovel and swung it like a cricket bat, whomping Malfoy back into unconsciousness. "Did you see that?"

James nodded, noticing a lump forming on the top of Malfoy's head.

"Excellent time for a joke, wouldn't you say?" Sirius scratched his chin. "Something like 'Heads up!' or 'Mal-*Fore*!' if you're uninspired. I, myself, lean towards the 'You forgot to duck, bitch' camp."

"Mosquito," James deadpanned.

“Good one,” Sirius encouraged. “I knew you had it in you. Now we really should get out of here.”

James frowned looking down on Lucius. “Can we take him with us? He’s just going to disappear off the grid until he can buy his freedom again.”

Sirius shook his head. “I can only side-along one. That’s why you get a rescue team of one.”

“And I doubt I can transfigure him because of that damned ring.”

“That’s right,” Sirius remembered. “I forgot how good you are at transfiguration. I need a Norton’s Brew and a willing subject to pull off human to inanimate. I suppose you could kill him.”

James seemed to be heavily considering the option.

“Hang on,” Sirius said. “We just need to get that ring off.”

“It’ll probably poison us if we try to remove it,” James argued.

“I’m just saying you could kill him,” Sirius reminded James of option one with a hopeful grin. “Or we could remove his finger.”

James shook his head. “Any cutting curse will bounce right off.”

Sirius jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Have you not seen how effective that shovel is?”

James looked over at the shovel and then Malfoy and then the shovel again. He figured they could delve into the ethics of apprehension by amputation once the blonde Death Eater was locked in a high-security cell. “A skilled healer could easily reattach the finger...”

“Unless we were to lose it,” Sirius suggested. “It’d be a shame to get splinched because we had to carry an extra finger.”

James twitched in amusement. “Okay, let’s do this.”

Sirius used a gloved hand to roll up all of Malfoy's non-ring fingers, while James got the shovel and positioned it right at the knuckle. Sirius took a step back but couldn't tear his eyes from the sight.

James took a deep breath and jammed the shovel down forcefully. There was an audible click sound and the singular severed digit popped about a meter up into the air before clattering on the floor.

Lucius woke up suddenly screaming in pain.

Sirius immediately cast a silencing charm on the hurting Lord Malfoy and cheered at the success of the spell.

James saw Lucius was going to try and crawl away. He took two steps towards him and swatted him viciously on the ear with the shovel.

Lucius buckled back to the ground unconscious again.

"Uh, James?" Sirius pointed out. "You could've just stunned him now."

"I know," James agreed. "But I didn't want to let you have all the fun."

Sirius guffawed at the unexpected response. "You severed his finger. I doubt I got all the fun."

James was looking away, hiding his smile. He wrapped the unattached ring finger in a piece of cloth and stuffed it into Malfoy's pocket. With a grunt of forcing the magic through an unfamiliar wand, James transfigured the unconscious Death Eater into a plain red coin. He slid the coin into his pocket and nodded at Sirius.

Sirius had taken off his chameleon cloak and was offering it to James.

"Thanks," James said accepting the cloak, unused to this kinder, gentler Lord Black.

"We need to stay hidden if we can," Sirius explained as he tapped his head and the disillusionment charm trickled down him and his

dragon-hide robes. "You stink a lot more than me, so you need the cloak."

James activated the disillusionment charm on the cloak and took the lead.

"Hang on," Sirius whispered harshly. "You don't know where we're going, so you follow me."

"There's only one direction," James pointed out, not yet ready to defer to Sirius' judgment.

"And if you even touched that door up there, you'd get blasted into the wall."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm the auror here, right?" James argued as the pair had been walking up the steps side by side.

"You're the damaged victim who's been tortured for the past few hours," Sirius scolded trying to stay in the lead. "Don't overexert yourself."

"Shh!" James snapped as he stopped suddenly. "Do you hear that?"

Sirius paused and listened closer. "Someone's coming! There's a room just ahead. Quick!"

James tried to run as softly as he could, cursing the sounds of his feet, and wishing he had charmed silent boots like Sirius.

Sirius yanked James off the side, and pulled them both into a musty old cupboard. They cast silencing charms at the same time and shushed each other. They heard the footsteps getting louder when a voice spoke up.

"He was already screaming when I saw him this morning, my Lord. He's probably broken by now."

"Do not underestimate the Potters," a powerful voice hissed.

James and Sirius stared at each other in shock suddenly realizing the Dark Lord Voldemort could catch them hiding in a broom closet.

James' eyes hardened and he pulled his wand arm up. "It's him."

Sirius grabbed onto James' hand and held him back. "Yes, it's him."

"We can kill him now," James snarled looking to Sirius for help.

"Are you fucking insane?" Sirius whispered angrily. "We cannot kill him now. Trust me. All we could do is piss him off. And you need medical attention already."

"He killed my son!" James snapped loudly, pushing the two silencing charms to their limits. He deflated into a broken man as he softly added, "And he killed my best friend."

Sirius felt more twisted inside than he had since Azkaban. Hearing a James Potter echoing the same pain he'd gone through was just confusing. "There's nothing we can do. Not right now."

"You fought him," James argued petulantly. "What are you so worried about?"

"I didn't fight him," Sirius corrected. "Harry fought him. I don't care if you're Albus fucking Dumbledore, I'm not going head to head with Voldemort unless Harry's got my back."

"You're the one always acting so superior-"

"That's the point," Sirius interrupted. "*Acting*. Pureblood politics bollocks is mainly about who can cheat the most in a dick-measuring contest."

James had a flash of his Hogwarts days and another Sirius Black making an eerily similar statement. "Are you scared of him?"

"I'm not scared," Sirius retorted as he slowly opened the creaky cupboard door. "I just have a healthy amount of respect for his ability to squash people like me."

James couldn't help it. He snorted and started to laugh.

Sirius whipped around and shushed him. "We don't have time for this."

James wondered aloud, "When did you start acting responsibly?"

Sirius scowled and retorted softly, "Probably about the time your sense of humor came back from sabbatical."

James smiled at the barb and urged Sirius forward. "Come on."

An ear-piercing shriek echoed from down the bottom of the steps.

"Run!" Sirius instructed and he began to sprint up the steps as fast as he could. A Death Eater was blasted in the face before he even realized he was under attack.

James cast a pair of exploding curses on the stairs behind them, making it more difficult to follow.

"Don't use the door!" Sirius shouted as he saw they were nearly at the top. "Follow me."

Sirius fell to his knees and finally located the illusory pin, deactivating it with a touch of his wand. Sirius stuffed the pin in his pocket, canceled his disillusionment charm, and crawled through his homemade tunnel. He stopped and made sure James was right behind him. "As soon as we get out from under these Dark Mark targeted wards, I can apparate us."

James nodded, knowing this was a time to follow, not lead.

Sirius deactivated the last pin and crawled out of the hole. He shoved it in his pocket as he stood up and discovered he was in a room with more than two dozen masked Death Eaters staring his way. Thinking quickly, Sirius said, "What do you guys think of my disguise?"

When it appeared they weren't going to curse him immediately, he added, "Aren't I just the spitting image of the good looking Lord Black?"

“Naw, you look like the tall one,” a Death Eater pointed out. “The good looking one has those hypnotic eyes.”

A few other Death Eaters turned towards the vocal member curiously. “Smith? Is there something you’d like to tell us?”

Right then, a clearly bruised and dust covered disillusioned James Potter stood up behind Sirius, unable to see past him.

“Get him!” three men shouted as they all started cursing.

Sirius had already grabbed James by the arm and apparated them away before the first spell arrived.

Sarah considered herself a fair witch. Both of her parents were above average in power, and while it’s true her little brother started beating her regularly in duels last year, she knew she was far from a helpless-with-a-wand, trophy witch. When the first two Death Eaters approached she managed to stun them both and run away. She’d cursed several others, leading them on a frantic chase before a table got blasted into her ankle and she was boxed in.

She admitted to feeling hopeless as they activated their portkeys only to have her prayers answered as the portkeys remained inert. She sprung into action in their confusion and took great pleasure kneeling one of them in the crotch. She’d made her way further into the back, shouting for help again after losing her wand for the second time. These were the actions of a fairly competent witch, she assured herself.

Even still, getting yanked around like a rag doll by Harry could give anyone inadequacy issues.

She had flinched when the two nearest Death Eaters slammed into the wall with a loud crunch. She barely noticed the beauty of the Fidelius cage crumbling, as the sound of two more necks breaking echoed around the room. She felt the tension in the room thicken as dozens of curses flew straight towards them.

She knew she'd be too late in getting a shield up, but she needn't have bothered as the body of a Death Eater was thrust into the path of the spells. A sudden mist of blood coated the right side of her face and she felt things were getting too close for comfort. A glance at Harry showed him completely unaffected and what she would've sworn was a smile flitted across his face.

She began to think Harry might be crazy, but was forced to admit he was commanding magic on a level she'd never match.

"I beat your Master in open air," Harry snarled, playing up their fear of him. "You really expect to take me in close quarters?"

Sarah was about to suggest less taunting when she felt something like an invisible snake wrapping around her midsection. She barely realized what was happening when she was thrust up to the ceiling. Her arms were mashed against Harry's back as they zipped from one corner of the room to the next, essentially ignoring gravity's protestations.

Bones were breaking, curses were flying, chunks of the wall and floor exploded sending dust and shrapnel everywhere. Sarah's eyes could barely keep up with carnage raining down when she and Harry landed on their feet at the door.

Harry began to stalk down the hallway, enjoying every step as the Death Eaters kept backing up, frightened of getting too close.

Sarah saw the destruction left in their wake. Blood was everywhere. The other door was hidden behind a pile of bodies and wreckage. There weren't even any patches of wall that had made it through unscathed. She remembered Harry's suggestion when she recognized how many were groaning in pain, and shrieking about misplaced body parts. She fumbled with her wand to stun them when she was again jerked to the side and a searing orange spell whizzed past her collapsing the back wall.

Sarah began to worry as she had lost her wand, and Harry appeared fully focused on the Death Eaters in front of them. Her wand came floating out from under a piece of the collapsed ceiling and it just hovered there waiting for her to grab it. That small gesture proved to

her just how in control of the situation Harry was. She quickly drew on his presence and nearness as a source of comfort.

Sarah proceeded to stun all the still breathing Death Eaters, while keeping her other hand on Harry's back.

She saw Harry down another pepper-up potion while the Death Eaters just watched them fearfully from the other end of the hallway.

"You okay?" Harry asked softly out the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah," she said as she moved closer to him, pressing her body up to his back. "Let's get out of here, please."

"Sounds good to me," Harry said, wrapping an invisible arm around Sarah and magically tethering her to his back.

She caught on to what Harry wanted and wrapped her arms around his stomach. She felt Harry rock back on to his heels before launching the pair of them like a torpedo down the hall.

Drywall, plaster, chunks of stone and wood were exploding from the floor and walls. A shield in front of them deflected the only spells that came their way. Death Eaters were crushed and crumpled as Harry and Sarah span through the air with the force of a locomotive.

The half dozen or so remaining Death Eaters who could still manage it were sprinting through Madam Puddifoot's dining area and out the front door.

"Go on! Run away you pussies!" Harry shouted happily as he and Sarah flipped up and back to their feet. Harry grinned as he saw Death Eaters hustling down the street. "I think seeing them run away may be even better than beating them up."

Sarah started to relax as she picked pieces of debris from her hair. She saw the flicker of a disillusionment charm a second too late. "Harry!"

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Two separate voices shouted from opposite sides of the dining room.

A pair of magical arms yanked Sarah down and out of the path of a killing curse just as Harry turned in time to see the other sickly green spell line up with his heart.

Sarah gasped when she saw the two spells had sandwiched Harry in and he was unable to dodge. She could only gape in disbelief as the moment they were about to connect, Harry's body faded out of view into a ghostly incorporeal form. The curses zipped harmlessly through his body leaving only faint trails of smoke as they passed.

The two Death Eaters' faces froze permanently in shock as the errant spells slammed into each others' unprotected and disillusioned bodies.

Harry had never been more thankful for his animagus form than at that moment, and he gave the room a belated but thorough evaluation. Satisfied with his search, Harry closed his eyes and forcefully willed his body back into solid form. A gentle pop told him he'd succeeded for the first time and he opened his eyes.

He offered a hand to help a wide-eyed Sarah up. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention that last part to anyone."

She looked over at the two lifeless bodies and then Harry incredulously. "Okay."

Harry walked with Sarah out the front door just as the roof caved in destroying the last of the dining area. "Oops," Harry said with a little too much glee. "You okay?"

Sarah just nodded mutely, staying close to Harry. The two of them were leaning on each other for support.

Harry chuckled as they walked by a pair of aurors fighting to put out a magical fire. He could feel the adrenaline leaving his body as the danger had passed. "They were disillusioned and fired killing curses directly across from each other. Not the brightest bulbs in the bunch."

"That was pretty stupid," Sarah agreed as she let Harry lead them over to the next building.

He retrieved his anchor stone and canceled the portkey and apparition wards. He spotted Tonks running towards them and apparently his body decided that was its signal to shut down.

“Sarah!” Tonks shouted hugging the young woman she used to babysit. “You’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” Sarah said trying to ignore the unknown wet purple pieces of Death Eater in her hair. “Harry came and...” She trailed off when she noticed Harry was laying face first on the ground. “Harry!”

She hurriedly checked him over and concluded he was healthy enough just severely exhausted, a common reaction to multiple doses of pepper-up.

“The headmaster is about to bring down the wards,” Tonks informed. “Think you get Sleeping Beauty to the hospital wing?”

Sarah nodded. “Yeah, but you might want to secure the Death Eaters back there.”

“How many’d you two get?” Tonks asked with a grin.

Sarah shrugged. “Not really sure. Maybe thirty?”

“That’s a lot of paperwork,” Tonks gulped before spotting a junior auror. “Hey Perkins! Go secure the Death Eaters in Madam Puddifoot’s! I’m escorting these two to Hogwarts.”

Sarah chuckled at Tonks’ look of innocence. “Escorting us, eh?”

Tonks waved her wand and began to levitate the snoring Lord Black. “You know sleepyhead back there was trying to convince me he understood women? Please. If it weren’t for you, I doubt he’d ever have gotten out of there alive.”

“Tell me about it,” Sarah agreed walking in step with Tonks. “I must have stunned at least a dozen of them.”

It only took one sniff for Harry to determine where he was. The cushioned bed, the starched sheets, the oppressive sense of being smothered, and the smell all told him one thing: he was in the Hogwarts hospital wing.

A pounding headache reminded him that he'd exhausted himself, so he asked, "Hello?"

"I'm here, Harry," Sirius' voice soothed as he watched Harry crack open his eyes.

"I've got a potion for you, Lord Black," Madame Pomfrey's less than warm voice stated.

Harry accepted the sludge and realized this woman didn't know him at all. He quickly knocked it back, grimacing at the texture more than the taste. He accepted the glass of water and tried to wash the taste from his mouth. "What happened when I was out? Why did I need to come here?"

"You exhausted nearly all of your magical reserves," Poppy Pomfrey chided.

"So?" Harry asked blinking in the brightness of the room. "I do that all the time. And do you have anything for my headache?"

Poppy harrumphed. "Pepper-up potions are not candy, Lord Black. There's a reason you are supposed to wait six hours before even considering taking a second one."

"Can't you do something for my headache before you lecture me?" Harry pleaded. "If you want any of your words to get through, it'll have to be after this throbbing goes away."

"You earned that headache and you're going to keep it or you'll never learn," Poppy scolded as she retreated back towards her office.

"Thanks for pissing off my boss, Harry," Sarah humorlessly cheered from the other side.

Harry slowly began to look around the room and became aware everyone was staring at him. Jimmy was smiling, sitting on the edge of a bed next to Sirius. Tonks was grinning at him, as was Lord Peter Potter and Albus Dumbledore. On Harry's other side Sarah stood, while James Potter lay in the bed behind. Lily Potter was clutching her husband's hand tightly, but looked like a coil waiting to spring a hug on Harry.

She lunged forward and squeezed him, profusely thanking and praising him for saving her little girl.

Harry was still feeling more than a little out of it as he hugged her back.

"Lily, let the poor man breath," James chided as he sat up. "Thank you, Lord Black. If ever you need anything-"

Peter took the opportunity to interrupt. "Yes, Lord Black and Lord Black? The House of Potter is indebted to both of you individually and to the House of Black-"

"Stop, stop," Harry jumped in. "Really. It was nothing. All I want is a little quiet and for this damn headache to go away."

"POTTER!" the deafening shout came from down the hall.

Harry clenched his eyes shut and was rubbing his temples at the sound of Severus Snape bursting into the hospital wing.

"I know it was you, Potter!" Severus shrieked over the sudden loss of his hair. "You're even more arrogant than your father! Repeating the same immature, childish pranks—*Are you even listening?* I'm talking to you, Potter!"

Jimmy just paled, trying not to laugh at the shine on the top of his Potions Professor's head.

"Yes, I'm fucking listening, *Snivellus*," Harry spat out. "That snot-filled wheezing you call breathing is like acid to my ears." Harry pinched the bridge of his nose as the throbbing seemed to increase. He slowly caught on to the oppressive silence hanging in the air and looked up.

“Uh, Harry?” Jimmy warily interjected. “I think he was talking to me.”

Harry saw varying degrees of confusion and shock staring back at him, aside from Albus and Sirius who were both twittering in barely restrained amusement. “Oh... bugger.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Harry wasn't sure what an anxiety attack felt like, but guessed this would be as good a time as any to find out. He looked pleadingly at Dumbledore. "Uhh..."

Albus shook his head negatively at Harry.

Harry uneasily met the shell-shocked gazes of all the Potters in the room and turned back to the Headmaster, silently begging him with wide unblinking eyes.

"No," Albus insisted firmly with a stern expression.

"Uh... uh... uhh..." Harry stuttered before settling on a course of action.

"Harry, *no!*" Albus said wagging his finger at the younger man.

Harry was trying to come up with ways of interpreting 'no' into meaning 'yes' or at least 'alright, but just this once.'

Severus Snape finally broke the suffocating tension with a loud gasp. "You're the Potter hellspawn in the prophecy!"

Harry knew exactly how to respond to that accusation. "*Obliviate!*"

Severus deftly parried the memory charm and assumed a defensive position. "How dare you!" He sent back a disarming charm that Harry blocked with little effort. "Headmaster, are you just going to stand there and let him-"

"*Obliviate,*" Albus regrettably cast, just as Severus turned his direction. The Potions Master flashed a shocked look of betrayal just before his eyes glazed over. He fell into a gentle sleep from a swish of Albus' wand. Albus frowned at Harry, showing how distasteful albeit necessary his actions were.

"Thank you, Albus," Harry said, relaxing momentarily with a supremely grateful smile. "But you missed a whole lot of the others." He finished pointing towards everyone else in the room.

“Harry,” Albus scolded.

“WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS GOING ON?” James finally exploded, holding his wand at the ready.

Lily was visibly shaken. She looked to be teetering on the brink of collapsing into tears. “Harry?”

Harry looked at the closest thing to his mum that he’d ever remembered and could find no words. “Blih...ber... bluh...”

“I need some answers,” James demanded, swinging his wand arm across the room. “Right *fucking* now.”

Sarah was frowning. “You can’t be grandpa if you’re a Potter.”

“What?” James snapped in confusion.

“Is this about the basilisk?” Jimmy wondered aloud.

“What?” James snapped again.

“How do you know about the basilisk?” Albus jerked in surprise.

“Okay, not the basilisk,” Jimmy meekly said.

“Harry?” Lily repeated unable to move.

James suddenly put two and two together. His voice was as quiet this time as it had been loud before. “*Sirius?*”

“Stop!” Harry shouted, attracting everyone’s attention. “Stop! You’ve all got the wrong idea. Just give me a second here.” He held his hand up and took a moment to collect himself.

One second turned into three, and three became five before Albus realized Harry was calculating. “Harry!”

“Sorry,” Harry admitted, biting his bottom lip, still hoping to wake up from this emotional nightmare.

Sarah could tell Harry was hesitant to tell them everything and decided to start small. "Just how closely are we related? Because I feel dirty already and if you're just a drifter pretending to be my dead older brother..." Sarah trailed off as everyone looked at her. "What? It could happen."

"He's trying to hide the fact that he's our brother," Jimmy said looking at his sister and trying to remember if she always had that freckle by her eye.

"I'm *not* your brother. If anything I'm trying to hide the fact that I'm not... your... okay this is getting confusing." Harry said distractedly.

"Just tell them the truth, Harry. They need to hear this from you," Albus urged. "And you must know I will correct any and all falsities in your story."

James turned to the Headmaster hostilely. "You knew about this?"

Albus took a step back at the vehemence suddenly directed his way. "So did Tonks," Albus pointed and sold out the auror subordinate.

"Hey," Tonks whined.

Albus held up his hands in a gentle and calming manner. "And please let Harry explain before you jump to the wrong conclusions."

They all turned to look at Harry, who turned to look at his godfather. "Sirius?"

Sirius had thought it was hilarious to see how rattled his godson had become, especially since it had been Harry and not him who had messed this one up. But the sheer anger James was exhibiting coupled with how scared and fragile Lily looked made the situation a lot less amusing to him.

Sirius opened his mouth to say something and stopped at the sight of his former best friend. He opened his mouth once more, managed to produce a slightly strangled sound before finally just saying, "Good luck, Harry."

Sirius instantaneously popped into his animagus form and burrowed under Harry's hospital bed, letting out sad little warbled barking the whole way.

James' wand fell from his hand the second he saw Sirius' transformation. His entire body deflated in defeat.

"Coward," Harry grumbled at the canine hiding out of sight.

Lily staggered forward and gripped onto Harry's arm frantically. "Please."

Harry's heart never stood a chance at that look and he gave up. "You're right. I'm sorry. You all deserve an explanation. And I'm going to give you one." He took a deep breath and let it out. "Right now." He nodded resolutely. "This very minute."

"Harry!" Albus cried while fighting the urge to strangle the young man.

"Okay, okay," Harry said grabbing a hold of Lily's hand. "This may take a while, so you'll want to sit down."

Lily wasn't going anywhere just yet, and kept a sweaty hold of Harry's hand.

"Right," Harry said as he uncertainly began. "Okay, I was born Harry Potter, son of James and Lily Potter."

Lily gasped, quietly mouthing, "My baby."

James was confused. "My son is a... blood purist?"

"I'm not a blood purist!" Harry pleaded before remembering, "And I'm not your son."

"I think your headache might be contagious," Jimmy said clenching his eyes in discomfort.

"Yeah," Harry quickly agreed. "Maybe we should take a few minutes to relax our Occlumency shields and look towards my wand-"

"Harry!" Albus shouted pointing his wand at the young man.

“How can they be your parents and you not be my brother?” Sarah logically questioned.

“Hang on,” Jimmy said thinking deeply. “I know I’ve heard this riddle.”

“They’re not my parents-”

“No, that’s not it,” Jimmy said dismissing Harry’s help with the riddle.

Harry was getting irritated and shouted over everyone’s questions. “My parents died Halloween, 1981. They gave their lives to save me.”

Lily painfully stared at Harry while the other Potters fell back in their respective seats.

Harry continued when he realized they were paying attention. “My godfather, Sirius Black, was sent to Azkaban because people thought he was our secret keeper.”

Pathetic whimpering came from under the bed.

“I am not your son,” Harry said, pleading with Lily to understand. “And you are not my parents.”

Lily felt struck. She was being rejected and this impostor was just trying to hurt her.

“Don’t be a dick, Harry,” Tonks said with a frown.

Harry saw the way Lily was reacting and exclaimed, “It’s nothing to do with you! It’s me. Trust me. I-”

“Trust you? Because you’ve been so *honest* with us so far?” James bitterly reminded. He picked up his wand and pulled his distraught wife closer. “Who the hell are you?”

Sirius decided he’d had enough and crawled back out from under Harry’s bed. He popped right back into place and grabbed a hold of Harry’s collar. “I think I’ve heard all I need to from you.”

Harry just looked at his godfather in confusion as Sirius pulled Harry up and slammed him down on the bed behind him. The cushioning charms ensured it looked worse than it was. "Sirius? What are you?"

Sirius slapped Harry twice across the face and pointed an accusing finger at him. "You know what you-"

Harry didn't give Sirius a chance before he'd tackled him to the ground. Both of them were rolling across the hospital room floor, mere meters from the exit when Albus caught on.

A flick of his wand and the door swung shut with a loud clap. "Don't even think about it," Albus warned.

Sirius and Harry stopped their struggling and looked at the door. In unison they both exclaimed, "Bugger."

Sirius shrugged and said "Sorry, kid. I tried."

"What did you call me?" Harry raged as he picked up and slammed his godfather into the door.

"Oww," Sirius weakly protested.

Harry saw the door hadn't budged and he didn't recognize the locking charm Albus had used. "Damn."

"That is enough!" Albus roared.

"It was worth a shot," Harry mumbled, knowing he'd earned this chastisement. Harry looked at Sirius curiously. "That door wasn't open all along, was it?"

"Naw," Sirius said rubbing his sore shoulder. "I opened it while I was regrouping under the bed."

"Regrouping?" Harry repeated doubtfully.

James' patience was once more at its end. "You think this is funny? You think toying with us is amusing?"

"Well, no," Sirius replied. "That was why we were trying to make a break for it."

"I appreciate the effort," Harry said while carefully maneuvering his godfather to stand in front of him.

"You're welcome," Sirius said, moving over to stand behind Tonks. "But you're still telling them your story. Not me. For the record though? I'd recommend starting with the dimension traveling rather than repeatedly breaking your mum's heart."

Harry's face was covered by his palm as he muttered to himself. "She's not my mum."

"Dimension traveling?" Peter Potter spoke calmly for the first time.

"Yeah, dimension traveling," Harry repeated. "We come from a world where my parents died when I was one. So no brother or sister for me," Harry said nodding towards Jimmy, who'd moved over to sit next to Sarah.

Harry figured he should try and get as many relevant details out as he could before curses started flying. "A little before I turned sixteen, this was about three years after this knucklehead broke out of Azkaban, he got pushed through a dimensional portal of sorts and stuck in limbo. Last April, I started studying the portal and he got spit out into this world after ten years of basically not existing."

Sirius had to be poked three times before he took over and explained, "I woke up in a hospital bed and they asked me who to call. Last I knew, Harry'd walked into a Death Eater trap, and of course, I thought James Potter had been dead for over a decade, so I asked for Remus Lupin."

"Remus knows?" James asked, feeling like the odd man out.

Tonks started chuckling. "He's going to be so upset he missed this."

"You want me to go get him?" Harry offered.

"No!" almost every voice shouted back at Harry.

"Right," Sirius snickered at Harry's pout. "So anyway, that's when I found out it was ten years later and I was in a new world. Remus was helping me, and that meant Tonks got to hear my story. I was excited and frightened to tell it to you," Sirius said nodding towards James. "But that was before I realized you were a prick."

"Padfoot," Harry scolded.

"Maybe I wasn't the most understanding bloke," Sirius admitted with a roll of his eyes. "But come on. You insulted me, you told Jimmy how I was everything wrong, and you lost your bleeding sense of humor."

James just stood there stupidly, while Lily was wrapped around him.

"You gotta admit that Prongs, the teenager who graduated Hogwarts and the only James Potter I ever knew, would have been appalled at what you've turned into."

"Sirius," Harry interrupted. "Stop it."

Sirius shrugged remorselessly but stayed quiet.

"I get why you've never grown up," Harry said, earnestly addressing his godfather. "I really do. And contrary to just about every other adult around, I think it's great. But I also get why this James Potter *did* grow up. And you need to get it as well."

"I get it... *now*," Sirius reluctantly admitted. "I might not have at first, but I do."

"Do you?" Harry questioned.

"It's you, you goofy retard," Sirius said as his eyes began to get glossy. "We both lost our best friends. But he lost you too, so he had to change. I still had you, so I had to try and be what I thought he'd want me to be... for you."

A smile began to grow, brighter and wider as Harry stood there listening to his godfather. He was just grinning proudly at him before he realized what was going on. "Oh shit," Harry said wiping his eyes. "My allergies are always flaring up this time of the year."

"Is it the hay fever?" Tonks asked with a grin. "Or maybe the bullshit?"

Sirius was rubbing his sleeve across his face too. "Whatever it is, it brought some bugs with it."

Lily had managed to detach from James and scurried over to Harry, wrapping her arms around him as her tears were flowing freely. "Oh Harry."

"A little help, guys?" Harry pleaded as Lily's body shook with sobs. "She's crying, guys. Like big honking tears. This isn't going to help my allergies." Harry said in between loud snuffles. "Please? Anyone?"

Everyone seemed content to let Harry struggle with the emotionally exhausted Lily Potter.

"There, there," Harry said, inside praying that she would stop crying. He awkwardly patted her back. "There, there."

"Harry?" Albus encouraged. "Perhaps you could continue with your story."

Harry just held on to Lily who had moved around and was now resting her head on his shoulder. He looked at her with suspiciously bright eyes and continued. "Right, okay. Well, about two months after I started working on the portal, I got sucked in it too. So it was around the start of June, that I ended up in this world. I looked up Moony in the muggle phone book and tracked down Sirius. Since then, I've been kinda playing catch up with a new history of the world as I know it and... yeah."

"Thank you, Harry, for such a richly detailed account," Albus blandly retorted. "I suspect the Potters would like to know a little more about your life, your youth, your friends, your accomplishments."

Lily seemed to be getting a hold of herself but still wasn't letting go of Harry.

Peter saw Harry looked uncomfortable. "Anywhere you'd care to start is fine."

"I want to hear about that scar on your head," Sarah suggested.

"If we died, then who saved you?" James inquired. "Who protected you when we couldn't?"

"And if Sirius was in Azkaban," Lily said looking up brightly. "Where'd you grow up?"

Jimmy was scratching his head. "Is anyone else getting a strong feeling of déjà vu?"

"Oh boy," Harry muttered to himself. He was trying to figure out which question would lead to the least unpleasant conversation. "Can we take a break or something?"

"Still have a headache?" Sirius asked.

"What headache?" Harry said before catching himself. "I mean yes."

"You want to release me from my oath?" Tonks asked, knowing a big chunk of Harry's secrets were out in the open now among the Potters. "I can help."

Harry and Sirius nodded at each other. "You're good."

Tonks turned to Sarah, then James, and then Lily in order. "It's from a reflected killing curse. You guys saved him. I think Lily did some sacrificial protection charm thing. And he grew up with the Dursleys." Tonks paused on Jimmy and looked back at Harry. "You did, didn't you?"

Harry had winced at every blunt answer and nodded guiltily to her question.

James frowned and turned inquisitively to Albus.

Albus was having entirely too much fun and explained, "Why do you think I kept checking him for memory charms?"

"Yeah," Harry said moving over towards Jimmy and drawing his wand. "Let me go ahead and undo that."

James jumped forward pointing his wand straight at Harry. "Step away from my son."

Harry just barely glanced over his shoulder, ripped the wand from James' hand, and pinned both of his arms to his sides.

With a gentle tap, Harry broke the memory charm on Jimmy, who was staring cross-eyed at the wand between his eyes.

"Oh," Jimmy said blinking away a split second of confusion. "Okay."

Harry took a step back and his magical arms released their hold of James Potter.

James was incensed at how easily he'd been dismissed as a threat but a part of him felt awfully proud thinking of the kind of wizard his first son would have become. He felt the vice like grip on his arms dissipate and plucked his floating wand out of the air. He strode over to his youngest. "You okay?"

Jimmy nodded. "I saw the name Harry Potter on the-" Jimmy stopped suddenly. "Umm... thing."

"I know you have the map," James assured him. "I told Remus to give it to you."

"You did?" Jimmy asked in surprise. "Why didn't you just give it to me?"

"I didn't want to set a bad example," James sheepishly admitted. "And I don't always like remembering those days."

Jimmy knew his older brother and dad's best friend were difficult topics for his dad. "Harry told me about his world and then I told him to memory charm me." He was scratching his head. "Though that night is still a bit fuzzy."

"That's the alcohol," Harry explained. "Not a charm."

Sarah stuck her arm into the air, waiting to be called on.

“Sarah?” James asked.

“Can we back it up a second? Because I could have sworn Tonks said reflected killing curse.”

“That’s my girl!” came the muffled exclamation from Madam Pomfrey’s office.

Everyone stopped and turned to the cracked open door at the end of the wing. They all remained silent and looked at the Headmaster. Albus tiredly nodded and walked towards the office.

“I said that too loud, didn’t I?” the question came clearly from the office.

“Poppy,” Albus greeted as he found her holding a cup up to her ear.

“Headmaster,” Poppy said, still holding the cup.

“You understand what I have to do?”

Madam Pomfrey pulled the cup down and stated. “I have another option. I’ll swear an oath. I just want to stay here and listen.”

Albus looked at the matron silently.

“Professional curiosity,” she explained.

Albus tilted his head, indicating she should try again.

Madam Pomfrey gave up the act and quietly confided, “This is better than my soaps on the Wizamundo Wireless. Please don’t take this from me.”

Albus looked at Harry and saw no significant objection. “Let’s figure out the wording for your oath.” Albus stepped in the office and pulled the door closed behind him.

James watched Harry as he asked, “Did you survive a killing curse?”

“It was my mum’s shield mostly, but yeah.”

"Marked as an equal," Sirius ominously said eliciting several gasps around the room.

"Oh, thank you, Sirius," Harry sarcastically chided. "I always love when the conversation inevitably gets to my preordained trip down murdering lane."

"You... beat him?" James asked, suddenly remembering the very public duel. "Of course you did."

Sarah was again hung up on the words. "Murdering is just a figure of speech, right?"

"He's being a drama queen," Sirius replied with a nod.

Harry was about to poke Sirius in the eye when he got a better idea. "Since you seem so eager to answer questions, it's your turn, Padfoot." Harry picked his godfather up with invisible arms and plopped him right in the middle of the room.

Sirius gulped at being thrust into the limelight but stood there waiting patiently.

"How did he beat Voldemort?" James asked.

Sirius shifted his weight to the other foot. "That's a complicated-"

"No," Harry interrupted with a whine. "Ask him questions about him. This guy comes from a whole different world. Aren't you curious?"

Everyone remained silent until James shrugged and answered. "I knew a Sirius Black pretty well. I have only unfulfilled dreams for Harry Potter."

Harry's jaw snapped shut with an audible click.

"Thing is," Sirius said, pondering a diplomatic answer. "Harry's not real big on talking about this kind of stuff. If it was anything that could help here, I know he'd be doing something about it. I haven't even heard all the details."

“But,” James was desperate. “If you did it once, you can do it again.”

“No,” Harry said glancing at Lily Potter. “I can’t.”

“You broke his neck,” James pleaded. “He was paralyzed and if he hadn’t had a portkey, he was done.”

“It’s not that simple,” Harry said. “And don’t underestimate Voldemort. That was a lot of luck because we had a lot of surprise on our side.”

Peter cleared his throat and sounded almost cold for the first time. “I think you’ll find we all know how seriously to take Voldemort.”

Harry spoke apologetically. “I’m sorry, but I’m not your savior. I did what it took to beat my Dark Lord. And the closest thing to solace I have is the knowledge that I can’t ever do that again. It’s not an option.”

“But the prophecy...” James begged.

“Is about someone else,” Harry finished for him.

Peter was able to see the larger picture more clearly than the other Potters. “It would have been nice if Voldemort was as certain as you are.”

Harry flinched and stayed quiet.

“What do you mean?” James asked his uncle.

Peter was watching Harry as he explained. “Have you not wondered just why Voldemort chose to attack Potters this morning? It wasn’t because of any widely known Potters.”

They all turned to Harry looking for an explanation.

Peter felt a bit guilty but continued. “He obviously made the connection and targeted us for that reason. I doubt it’s coincidence that tomorrow the Blacks are auctioning his ancestor’s locket either.”

“Shit,” Harry said turning to Sirius. “We’ve got to prepare for the auction.”

“Oh no, you don’t,” Lily said moving forward to grab onto Harry’s arm. “We won’t keep you all night, but we’re not done talking yet.”

Harry looked to Sirius for help. Sirius just grinned and scolded, “Be nice to your mother.”

“She’s not my m- You’re not my mother,” Harry repeated.

“Maybe not,” Lily strained to agree. “But you and I need to have a private conversation before you leave.”

“I need to have one with both of you as well,” James said in determination to Harry and Sirius.

“Oh joy,” Sirius said with a forced smile.

Albus had quietly emerged from the matron’s office and made his presence known. “You are still going through with the auction? After today’s events, you know it’s going to be even worse tomorrow.”

“Relax, Albus,” Harry assured. “We are prepared for almost any eventuality. Even if the Dark Lord makes the mistake of dropping by.”

“Will you at least then permit me to judge your preparations myself and assist you?” Albus inquired.

“See there’s this thing called plausible deniability.”

“Harry,” Albus said, as was becoming habit.

Harry thought it over and suggested, “You may just want to stay away altogether.”

“I’m going to be there,” Albus retorted with certainty. “Whether it’s to help or keep an eye on you.”

Sirius grinned. “How much did you pay for your invitation?”

Albus smiled thinly.

“The goblins know there’s no chance we’re going to accept any of the supposed offers,” Harry explained. “Their cut is all of the bribe money they can get for invitations.”

“You might as well tell them,” Peter advised the Headmaster. “I probably overpaid at 250 galleons for mine.”

“Lord Potter?” Harry looked at the Peter curiously.

“I told you to call me PJ,” Peter warmly reminded. “And I figured anything you two were neck deep in would be worth being ringside for.”

“PJ,” a contrite Harry said. “I thought you’d be angrier over the whole... endangering-all-Potters thing.”

“I am upset,” Peter stoically assured. “But as it turns out you’re a Potter by birth. And you both reacted immediately and effectively once you realized your mistake.”

“So we’ve got 250,” Sirius said looking at the Headmaster. “Do I hear higher? Lower?”

Peter glanced at Albus and answered. “He’s not embarrassed enough. He didn’t pay anything.”

Albus nodded at Lord Potter’s powers of deduction. “I convinced Bloodthrust that I was working with you. And I had the magic of a brotherhood charm to prove it.”

“Cheater,” Sirius grumbled.

Harry noted the air had a ‘calm after the storm’ feel to it. After a few seconds of silence he asked, “So what now?”

“Now, let’s talk,” Lily said jumping up and beginning to pull Harry with her.

“Harry,” Albus said attracting the young man’s attention. He gave him a significant look and nodded.

Harry knew what Albus was intimating, but couldn't help himself. "You think I should?"

Albus nodded. "I think you need this."

"Alright," Harry agreed. "I'll memory charm this one while you take care of the rest."

"Harry!"

"Kidding," Harry defended. "Geez, take it easy, Albus. You're not that young anymore."

Harry let Lily pull him down to her private quarters where she quickly established privacy charms.

"Why Mrs. Potter, are you trying to seduce-" Harry stopped and agreed with the look on her face. "Yeah, creepy."

"The shield," Lily said turning to face Harry. "The shield that protected you. That's why I'm drawn to you?"

"Kind of," Harry reluctantly answered. "But not really."

"Because it sounds like an idea I had." Lily was watching Harry closely. "That involved sacrificing my magic and tricking the attacker into sealing a new blood bond tying my soul into an eternal protection from that attacker specifically."

Harry nodded woefully. "My mum didn't exactly leave me her spell notes, but that sounds about right."

"I knew it would be strong, but..." Lily shook her head in astonishment. "Reflecting a killing curse?"

Harry smiled weakly. "When he possessed a wizard my mere touch burned them. It was stronger than any protection I've ever heard of."

Lily sat up in understanding. "So when you came into this world, the bond got transferred?"

"Not exactly," Harry replied.

Lily thought she had figured out the affect Harry had on her. "Why not? How do you know?"

"I know because the bond is gone. And it has been for a while."

Lily frowned.

"And actually the protection it offered has been gone even longer."

"I don't understand."

Harry knew he couldn't keep putting this off. "When I was fourteen, he used my blood in a rebirthing ritual that gave him a body again. With my blood running through his veins, it negated the protection."

Lily was running through her theory. "It shouldn't have negated the protection. What probably happened was that it protected him from the adverse effects of the protection."

Harry nodded slowly, adding this piece of information to his understanding. "That actually makes a lot of sense and explains a few things."

"Like what?" Lily was curious.

"Like why Albus was so insistent that I keep the blood wards active at Privet Drive after Voldemort's rebirth. And like my scar," Harry said tapping his forehead. "We all assumed it was the direct result of the killing curse. But all the curse did was to forge a link between my mind and Voldemort's."

"Oh no," Lily realized. "The protection fought the link, didn't it?"

Harry winced in agreement. "Any time Voldemort was close or using the link, my scar burned. A few times it'd split open and bleed. Until now, I never even considered that it was the protection that was hurting me, fighting Voldemort."

"I'm sorry," Lily said earnestly.

"You didn't do anything," Harry assured her. "And it did save my life in the face of impossible odds."

Lily nodded, frowning at the pain she knew Harry must have endured.

"On the plus side it made it real hard for him to sneak up on me," Harry said trying to lighten the mood.

Lily bit her lip. She softly suggested, "I could do it again."

"What? No," Harry snapped angrily that this woman would even consider such a thing.

"This Voldemort would never see it coming. He'd-"

"You don't get it," Harry yelled, cutting her off. "You're not my mother. It wouldn't work."

Lily frowned. "Maybe Jimmy could-"

"Stop, just shut up," Harry shouted. "If you knew what it would do to Jimmy, you'd never even consider it. You're not that cruel. Just... forget it."

Lily quickly ascertained there was more going on than she knew. She could tell Harry wasn't going to be terribly forthcoming on the details without some careful prompting. She gave him a moment to collect himself before switching gears. "Since you didn't know it was the protection hurting you, then why did you break the bond?"

Harry closed his eyes and avoided meeting Lily's gaze.

Lily gasped. "He broke it, didn't he? Just to hurt you."

"No." Harry looked up, as his eyes glistened. "Although now that you mention it, he probably knew full well what the protection was doing to me. He practically got off on the way his mere presence debilitated me."

"So *you* broke the bond?" Lily questioned warily.

Harry sniffled a little as he took a deep breath and stared at his feet. "I didn't break the bond." His voice was just over a whisper. "I... I used it."

Lily blinked in surprise. "You used it? What could you have used it... oh." Lily looked at Harry frightfully. "Oh."

Harry leaned back, his eyes shining as he stared up at the ceiling, unable to even look at Lily. "I destroyed my mother's soul so that I could destroy Voldemort's." Harry let out a shuddering breath. "I would've given my own in a second. I would've given almost anyone else's. But it doesn't work that way. He used my blood. Blood my mother was bonded to."

Lily honestly wasn't sure how she felt about Harry's actions but she could tell when he needed a hug more than she needed to make up her mind. She quickly moved across the room and held him tightly. "You know she never would have blamed you, Harry."

"Yeah, well, I made sure she never could."

Lily finally realized just why Harry was so vehement in his insistence that she wasn't his mother. His mother sacrificed herself to save him and he sacrificed her to save everyone else. Pretending that Lily was his mother dishonored her memory and also made Harry vulnerable again. "I think it's safe to say I know how she would feel better than anyone else. And she would have been so proud of you, Harry."

She hugged him tighter, urging him to believe her. "She would have been proud of your strength. So proud," Lily said unable to hold back her own tears.

Harry didn't even care that his allergies were making water stream from his eyes. "I like to think so," Harry agreed, feeling like the load on his shoulders was getting just a little lighter.

"She would be," Lily said again. "She would be."

"Okay, I get it," Harry said, hugging Lily back. "And I think I've figured out which side of the family my overdramatic streak comes from."

Lily snorted in between her sniffles. "I'm not your mother, Harry. We both know that. But I just want you to know, that if you want to call me Mum, no one would blame you, least of all her."

Harry patted Lily gently on the back. "Let's not go crazy just yet."

Lily groaned and squeezed Harry one last time as she pulled away. "Why do you have to be like that? We were having a moment there. We were connecting. Kind of like long lost mother-son but not really. And you ruined it."

Harry stepped back and pointed a finger. "You were trying to guilt me into it!"

Lily had the decency to blush.

"Unbelievable," Harry said with a shake of his head. "I'm opening up to you. I'm vulnerable."

Lily arched an eyebrow as she hooked an arm around Harry's elbow and proceeded to escort him back to the hospital wing. "And just how far do you think your apple's fallen from this tree?"

Harry's mouth twitched in agreement. "True enough. I sometimes make Sirius feel guilty for not getting me Christmas presents when he was in Azkaban."

"Wow," Lily said looking at Harry appraisingly. "That's low."

"Ahem," Harry mockingly cleared his throat.

"That was entirely different," Lily said attempting to end the discussion. "So you grew up with Petunia?"

Harry nodded.

"Was that as bad as I'm afraid it was?"

"It wasn't awful." Harry shrugged. "Roof over my head, secret blood protection I didn't know about, unfair split of household chores, enough second hand clothes and food to get by. The way I see it, it

would've been about the same at an orphanage, only without the secret blood protection."

Lily frowned and offered, "If you want we could go curse my sister sometime."

Harry bit back a snort. "I think I'd like that... Mum."

Lily jerked her head to look at Harry in surprise.

Harry broke into a grin. "I'm just fucking with you, Lily."

"Cruel, callous bastard," Lily calmly said. "Just remember you got that from my side of the family too."

Harry kept an eye on the devious woman walking next to him. "You know you can't tell anyone any of this, right?"

Lily kept pace with Harry and just stayed quiet.

"I'll snap," Harry warned. "I'm not kidding. I'll go dark. I'll kill everybody. I'm damn good at it."

Lily just patted Harry gently on the arm.

"Please? Lily?" Harry begged. "Mum?"

They arrived back at the hospital wing and stopped at the door. Lily leaned forward onto the tips of her toes and kissed Harry gently on his cheek. "Just because I'm not your mother, Harry, doesn't mean you can stop me from acting like it."

Harry smiled back at Lily, figuring if nothing else, he could spend time with her under the guise of apprenticing in emotional manipulation.

They opened the door and walked in, finding the hospital wing lively with conversation.

"Hey Harry," Sirius beckoned. "Who else knows about us? I know there's Gin."

"Gin Weasley?" Lily asked curiously. "She knows about you?"

Harry nodded. "She's under oath not to say anything."

Lily chuckled. "She told me she thought you were a woman in disguise."

"She *what?*" Harry said in a higher voice than planned.

A ghost popped into existence right next to Harry. "I told you that bitch was crazy."

"Oh boy," Harry grumbled.

Jimmy couldn't help himself. "Who is the hottie?"

"Oh dear god," Harry complained to no one in particular.

"Hello," the ghostly Ginny said with a flirtatious wave. "You must be James, junior."

Harry saw the ghost and his almost little brother were both smiling shyly. He resisted the urge to bang his head against the wall. "Everyone who's been gaping at me stupidly throughout the day and/or is still harboring doubts, this is the Ginny Weasley of our old world. She died. And she haunts me. Ginny, this is everyone."

Lily saw the tired look of resignation on Harry's face and started to laugh at the absurdity of it all. "I'm sorry," Lily said in between her giggling. "It's nice to meet you, Ginny." She just laughed louder, intermittently pointing at Harry.

"You know Ginny is Harry's soul mate," Sirius helpfully supplied, much to the amusement of Lily. "And how does Lily get Harry so easily? It usually takes people time before they realize Harry exists to entertain us."

"She's not my soul mate," Harry insisted in a manner eerily similar to his claims that Lily wasn't his mother. He turned to his traitorous godfather. "And you're about a half step away from a midget detention, buddy."

Ginny floated over next to the highly amused Lily. "Harry's still not sure how to accept my love, Mum. You don't mind if I call you Mum, do you?"

"Not at all," Lily said, her wide grin shining. "I think you and I will get along famously."

"Ginny, go," Harry pleaded as he was metaphysically pushing her away.

Ginny could tell she was about to disappear and shook her finger at Harry. "I told you that bitch was crazy," she reiterated just before disappearing with a pop.

"Wow," Jimmy said with a grin. "I mean... wow."

Harry looked over at Sirius. "We really need to get to work on the rest of the preparations."

James shook his head and stepped forward. "Not yet. We need to talk." James Potter, family man, disappeared and was replaced with James Potter, Assistant Director of the DMLE. He strode out the door, confidently expecting the Lord Blacks to follow him.

Sirius and Harry exchanged a few uneasy looks as they were led into an empty classroom.

James sealed the door shut behind them and sent out several auror-level security spells.

Harry looked over at Sirius, and they reached an unspoken agreement to wait on James.

James was standing uncomfortably, occasionally pacing and stopping. He looked up at them and began, "I'm in something of a quandary."

"Can we help?" Harry asked.

"Yes," James asserted. "You can. Let me explain my quandary. Hypothetically, let's say I'm investigating some robberies."

Harry and Sirius stood there, not responding in the slightest.

“And hypothetically, I made a huge break in the case. But the problem is I only caught the lead, because I observed a man’s surprisingly competent actions as he was saving my life and rescuing me from torture.”

“That’s quite a quandary,” Harry said while Sirius was fidgeting and swatting.

“Oww,” Sirius as he buckled away from a sharp poke in the side. “Stop it, Harry.”

“It is,” James agreed. “And it’s even more complicated by the relationship between myself and my... leads.”

Harry let up on his invisible assault of Sirius and replied. “So how can we help you with your quandary?”

“Hypothetically,” James carefully pondered, “my job would be easier if there weren’t any new cases to investigate. No further clues to follow up on.”

Harry was swatting Sirius’ hands, as he tried to poke Harry back. “You know, it’s entirely possible the target of your hypothetical investigation has already retired.”

“Really?” James said breaking from his cautious and careful wording.

Harry and Sirius nodded.

“No more new cases at all?” James slowly inquired. “Not even a little one?”

Harry and Sirius exchanged smiles and looked at James.

“Hypothetically,” Sirius jumped in. “Is there any particular place you regret not investigating?”

James knew getting captured and tortured earlier left him feeling more vindictive than usual but didn’t let that stop him. “Thing is,”

James explained. "These cases, they've been targeting Death Eaters. And I arrested this guy named Travers."

"Peter or Michael?" Harry questioned. He saw James looked surprised. "Both are."

"I meant Peter," James answered. "Peter's twice managed to buy his freedom with an *Imperius* defense, a couple names, and carefully placed donations. If ever there were a Death Eater who should be separated from his money, it'd be Peter. I didn't know about Michael."

"And this will help you with your quandary?" Sirius clarified.

"No," James said, not wanting them to think he was blackmailing them. "My quandary's been resolved. This would just make me happy."

"Retirements can be flexible," Harry replied before looking at the older man curiously. "What gave it away?"

James smiled and utilized the fine art of the back-handed compliment. "The least likely trait you'd expect from Sirius Black: he was smarter than he acted in public."

Harry snickered at Sirius' conflicted feelings.

James added, "He also managed to break into Malfoy Manor with a bit too much ease. He knew to avoid magic on Lucius, he wore specially charmed boots, a chameleon cloak, and carried illusory pins in his pocket."

Harry shook his head sadly at his godfather. "I knew you'd blow this for us."

"Says you," Sirius retorted hotly. "Mr. '*look at me, I'm Harry Potter.*' Oops."

"At least my way, we were able to control the situation," Harry said, clearly not remembering the last hour very well. "Your way we wouldn't have ever even known you'd blown it for us. And who knows what would've happened then. I probably saved our asses."

Sirius listened to Harry's rationalization with a smile. "A thousand galleons says you don't believe that."

Harry pouted quietly.

James took down his privacy charms and led them back towards the hospital wing.

"I was groggy," Harry argued the earlier point. "You should have warned me."

"Didn't you see? I was flashing you the 'hey, Harry, don't forget we're in an alternate universe' sign."

James watched the two banter and bicker, and felt pangs of jealousy. He wished he'd had this rapport with Harry, but felt grateful that Harry at least had Sirius.

They arrived back to find Tonks and Jimmy regaling the others with stories of Harry's adventures at Hogwarts.

"I just remembered," James said turning to Sirius. "I've got a wand you could use."

Sirius stiffened and looked at Harry.

"It was the other Sirius Black's. Driftwood, twelve inches, I think?"

"Sounds, sounds about right," Sirius stumbled through the words.

Harry carefully stated, "In the interests of full disclosure, I should mention we kind of... already... got that wand."

"You what?" the auror side of James asked dangerously.

"We're sorry," Sirius yelped. "But it's my wand. And it was just sitting there in your safe. And you were about to give it to me anyway."

James' stern face softened to a smirk. "I know." He turned and asked the others, "Where'd Albus go?"

Sirius just stared at James' back perplexed.

Harry elbowed his godfather. "Padfoot? You just got skunked by bizarro Prongs."

"I am going to break that little man," Sirius declared as Albus came up behind him.

"You know the muggles have a pill for that now," Albus commented as he brushed past. He lifted his pensieve into the air. "Found it."

"What's going on?" Harry asked as they joined the larger group.

"Seeing as you need to work on your preparations for the auction, I thought perhaps you could leave behind a number of memories, so that we all may get to know you better."

Harry glanced at Sirius worriedly before looking at all the others in the room. "That's a surprisingly good idea. How'd one of you come up with that?"

Lily, James, and Albus all began to defend themselves, but a voice from the matron's office could be heard clearly. "It was my idea."

"Got it," Harry said in understanding. He turned to Sirius. "So what highlights should we give them?"

"Stuff like your birth," Sirius answered, "could easily be the exact same here, in which case it's just a painful reminder. I'm thinking we should give them both our perspectives of that night at the end of your third year."

"You think that's a good idea?" Harry wondered. "I mean you bit Ron's leg hard enough to break it. And Moony bitch-slapped you right after he transformed into Captain Wolf-and-whine."

"It's a great night," Sirius argued thinking of its importance to him.

"And you were out of it for most of those dementors," Harry added. "There were a fuckload there. It was bad."

"Even still," Sirius insisted. "Are you going to show when they captured you?"

“Which one?” Harry said. “If you mean the second time, hell no. The first though? Where I was a main ingredient in the Voldemort rebirth soup? That one’s not too bad. Cedric died and I got crucioed a few times, but it was alright.”

James saw the other Potters were as horrified as he was. “What the-”

“Fuck,” Sarah finished for her father.

Sirius smiled brightly as they all got a glimpse of Harry’s crap-ass life. “Are you going to show them the basilisk?”

Harry frowned at the looks on the Potters’ faces. “That one seems to make people really nervous. I thought instead I’d show the end of first year, when I killed my first defense professor. That one’s always a crowd-pleaser.”

Peter wanted them to stop adding to his anxiety. “Why don’t you just surprise us?”

“Surprise you,” Sirius nodded eagerly. “I think we can do that.”

Harry and Sirius took the pensieve over to a corner and proceeded to fill it with several memories, many of them triggered to play in a set order. It took them twenty minutes, but they had deposited several hours’ worth of memories to peruse.

“You asked for a surprise, so the first few memories are queued up in order,” Harry explained handing Peter the pensieve. “After that it’s pick and choose.”

Right away, Jimmy, Sarah, Tonks, Peter, James, and Lily lined up around each other and plunged into the memories.

Albus held back as he watched Harry and Sirius. “You’re going to be gone before they even come out, aren’t you?”

Harry nodded, slightly elated to have dodged the goodbye bullet. “We gotta do this thing.”

“Oh god. Oh god. Oh God.” Tonks frightened shouts startled Harry.

He saw she was still in the pensieve. "Can people talk from inside a memory?"

"In cases of extreme emotion, yes, but it is rare," Albus explained with a nod. He paused in reflection. "Just what memory did you show them?"

Sirius smiled innocently. "Well, it starts with Tonks pregnant..."

"Really?" Albus said intrigued. "Who's the lucky man?"

Harry shook his finger negatively. "We don't want to ruin the surprise."

Five loud shouts of outrage and shock came from the group at the pensieve.

Albus stumbled momentarily and began to look at the pensieve and memories contained warily. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"There may be a few special highlight reels," Harry meekly admitted.

"We looped your 'I trust Severus Snape with my life' with Snape's 'Avada Kedavra' like twenty, thirty times in a row," Sirius explained. "And there's even a 'Sirius, we both know it's more important that he be alive than happy.' That one really got my goat."

"Oh dear," Albus mumbled, wondering how he'd not seen this coming.

"Come on," Harry said motioning with his head. "We've got a lot of work to do tonight. Albus, perhaps we'll see you tomorrow."

"I will be there," Albus assured.

Harry and Sirius walked out of Hogwarts and down to the edge of the wards.

"You sure you're up for this?" Sirius asked. "We can postpone. It's been a long day."

Harry shook his head. "Naw, I'm ready. I'm juiced. These wards are going to take some work, but I've built up a lot of nervous energy just waiting for an outlet."

Sirius nodded in agreement.

"And I want to find out who this fucker is."

Harry patiently sat cross-legged on the floor of the small converted chapel within a clear cylindrical tube. The top was smoothly curved and it stretched all the way into the floor below, giving the tube an appearance that made Sirius giggle. He claimed it was the irony of the similarity to the After Dark Mark, but Harry wasn't convinced.

Floating behind Harry, at about eye level from his seated position, was a large shiny mirror laying parallel to the ground. A transparent film was being pulled and stretched from the surface of the mirror encompassing a crystalline display case. In the display case behind Harry's head were the three lots they were required by goblin law to present.

Enlisting the assistance and authority of the goblins to manage this auction meant a few extra risks but it was well worth the effort of earning the goblin stamp of approval, so all parties involved would know there was legitimate bait in the trap.

There were four rows of seats, four seats on each side of the aisle splitting the room in half, and every one of the seats was filled. Thirty-two middle-aged and older uninvited wizards and witches were all exchanging wary looks and inspecting the seemingly innocent meeting room.

"Welcome, welcome," Sirius cheered emerging from a side door. "I see we have quite the packed house here."

Bloodthrust was the only goblin in the room. The pleasantly vicious creature nodded to Harry and Sirius and stood off to the side near the door Sirius had used. He was eagerly anticipating the results of this auction.

“It looks like everyone coming is already here, so let’s seal the doors and see if we can’t avoid interruptions.” Sirius looked over the podium and touched his wand on a button that in actuality did nothing other than give the appearance of a control console. Heavy duty solid metal doors appeared with the sound of creaking and stressing. Suddenly, all the sets of doors slammed shut, blocking all the windows, both side doors and the door in the back blanketing the room in darkness.

The interior lights gradually brightened, while everyone in the seats was getting a little restless.

“Oh don’t fret,” Sirius chided the nervous people. “Make sure you hang on to your invitations. You’ll need them if we alter the customized Fidelius on the fly. Treat them like your safety blanket as it appears we may have a few uninvited guests.”

“First things first,” Sirius continued. “We certainly want to ensure the safety of all of our properly invited guests, and there were many protestations that it would be rude and way too easy on us to make you surrender your wands. So we found a middle ground. Harry?”

Harry turned his hands flat onto the stone floor and pushed down hard, feeding extra power into the wards.

With only a whoosh sound for warning, every guest’s seat was surrounded with a clear cylindrical tube very similar to Harry’s. Shouts of outrage and worry began to spread and a few attempts to portkey away failed.

Some of the people were testing the strength and knocking on the inside walls and top of their tubes, surprised to find it made no sound, but they could hear just fine.

“We’ve got crashers,” Harry warned Sirius.

“Excellent,” Sirius explained to his literally captive audience. “It appears some people are intent on getting in the way of this auction. Let’s hear their grievances and see if we can’t resolve this peacefully.” Another faked motion of touching his wand to the podium and the front door slid open, revealing two dozen masked Death Eaters. “Is there a problem, gentlemen?”

The Death Eaters stormed into the room shouting war cries and thinking they'd overcome the wards. Many had stopped to look around the room curiously. Other than one goblin and Sirius, all the others were sitting down looking like a giant upside down rack of test tubes.

The man in the lead hesitated for only a moment before shouting "Die!" and launching a devastating blasting curse straight at Harry in his tube.

Harry didn't even blink as the bluish-purple spell zipped towards him. The magic slowed to a crawl as it neared the reflective glass and could only slide across the curved surface of the giant tube. The spell completed its circuit of the tube, picking up speed at the end, and rocketed off right back at the surprised caster.

The force of the spell had been magnified and the Death Eater's body was like a leaf in front of a cannon. The man was blown clear out of the building leaving only a pair of smoking boots behind. The thick metal doors slammed closed, crushing many thoughts of escape.

"This is so freaking cool," Harry commented from inside his tube. "It's like I could feel the magic in here. It tickles."

The more knowledgeable uninvited guests swore upon realization of the protective measures the Lord Blacks had taken.

The other Death Eaters had heard more than a few rumors about what happened yesterday, and it was no secret that a lot of their mates did not return from their missions. They had a fair idea of their Lord's expectations for success.

They watched the mission commander get roasted by a calmly seated Lord Black who was clearly more enamored to feel a tickling than he was bothered by the violent death. They spotted their inside men all looked nervous as hell and were making no motions to assist them.

The next Death Eater in line glanced over his shoulder before asking uncertainly, "Die?"

Harry's tube flickered and flashed with magic as he narrowed his eyes at the masked men. He sensed their hesitancy and calmly asserted, "I will break you."

"Oops!" the lead Death Eater said tossing his wand to the ground. "You got me."

"Coward!" a voice in the back of the group shouted.

Several more wands clattered to the ground and voices emerged. "Oops."

"Aww shucks."

"Clumsy me."

"Curses, foiled again!"

They all turned to the area from which the 'coward' exclamation had come. The lone Death Eater still holding his wand tossed it backwards over his shoulder. "Damn peer pressure."

"Smart move," Sirius commented as he walked over to a glistening anchor stone on the ground. He swished his wand over an edge of the stone and it rotated slightly. A purple beam of magic bled out the stone and connected with another glistening shaped rock. The line of magic streamed between the stones as they rose from the floor and stopped at the ceiling. Left in purple magic's wake was a solid black nothingness. "Why don't you guys walk on through there so that we can get on with our auction?"

The freshly wandless Death Eaters all looked at the mysterious darkness and then back towards the Lord Blacks. "We'll just stand, if that's okay."

Harry stared down the lead man until he swallowed the lump in his throat. He turned towards the other Death Eaters and nodded, "Excuse me, gentlemen." He calmly walked straight into the black wall and disappeared.

"You can go," Sirius nodded towards the wall, while keeping his wand ready. "Or we can make you."

"Works for me," was the response as the lemmings began to follow each other into the black wall. A couple of them hesitated, caught Harry's eye, and then changed their minds, jumping to the front of the line leading towards the unknown.

"I'm off."

"Goodbye."

"Good luck, Uncle Andre."

The last was directed to Andre Romanov, who was suddenly fidgeting inside his giant test tube, unconsciously rubbing the tattoo he was really beginning to regret.

"What have you done to them?" Albus inquired from within his own transparent penis-shaped prison.

"Nothing yet," Harry explained. He still hadn't stood up or made any ambulatory movement. "Why don't we give the Ministry workers here on undercover missions something to do?"

Sirius watched the last of the Death Eaters disappear, and saw on the quickie map he'd charmed that all twenty-three of them were accounted for and not moving. "That sounds excellent. Now I can see some of you have recognized our little protections around here and for those of you that haven't feel free to interpret your neighbor's look of fear and uncertainty as I explain this. We are on a Black property and here, for the next few hours, we've enacted some living wards. Only those genuinely invited are exempt from the negative effects of the wards, and most of those effects are currently being restrained by our unconventional use of a sentient anchor."

"I see the looks of doubt from those of you with only a passing familiarity with the law, but living wards are only illegal if they're anchored to a property. Anchoring them to a person is a perfectly acceptable alternative, since then the wards do not develop their own personality or become uncontrollably dangerous. Now that we're

clear on that point, let's just see who the Ministry chose to invite without our consent."

Again Harry placed his palms flat on the ground and pushed.

Slowly, most of the seats, clear arched tube, stone floor, and all, lowered about a meter into the ground. Ten of the tubes remained firmly in place. The guests now seated with just their heads above the floor, all looked up at the people separated from them.

Without warning one of the tubes still even with the ground, shattered and the wizard within sent three quick spells towards the magical display case.

Harry and Sirius both watched impassively as the case and all its contents disappeared with a pop.

"I do believe we have an Unspeakable in the house," Sirius announced calmly as he saw the portkey on the case had worked exactly as planned. He mimicked pushing a button, and a solid wave of light magic erupted from the east wall. It slowly passed through everyone in the tubes without incident, but forcibly pushed the loose Unspeakable into the inky black wall on the other side.

Sirius smiled at how effective the living wards were. "That was rude of him."

"You attacked him!" another of the heavily cloaked individuals exclaimed.

"He was uninvited and in an ancient Lord's home. I think it's safe to say the law is on our side in this one. Not to mention we now have a legitimate threat to our property from which we must protect." Sirius explained as he walked to the floating mirror and cast a spell at it. The surface of the mirror rippled like liquid and the crystalline display case floated up and out of the mirror. The same slight veil of magic covered it as before. "Now how many of the rest of you are aurors on the clock?"

One hand went up, subtly glancing towards all the others.

Sirius shook his head. "The least you could have remembered is that you always work in pairs. Now, I should point out, aurors on the clock get to walk out the door and not pushed into the wall."

Six hands went up among the remaining nine tubes at normal height. Twenty-two tubes were still submerged, guests stuck to their seats, with barely their head above ground.

"Excellent," Sirius cheered. "Because everyone going through that wall is getting splashed with a draught of living death and encased in solid rock."

The six tubes all shattered at once and the aurors immediately took the opportunity to rise from their seats.

"You all still have your so-called invitations?" Sirius reminded, once he was sure they weren't going to attack him. "Read them."

The aurors discovered another Fidelius secret that said simply, *The shed door is around back.*

As soon as they were done reading, the invitations burnt themselves until even the ash was gone.

"Help yourself to anyone out there," Sirius said as the front doors spun sideways one turn and the metal doors slid up and down rather than side to side. "The Death Eaters, the highly irritated Unspeakable, and any of the rest of these dangerous trespassers we send through the wall. Bit of advice? If I were you, I'd check their arms for tattoos *before* administering the antidote."

There was a tinkling sound of glass-breaking and suddenly a wave of force swept through the room. Harry and Sirius were unaffected, but everyone else in the room felt like they were being squeezed and compressed, tighter and tighter.

"Oh, you are good," Harry said looking towards the would-be-thief fading into view frozen in place. The room darkened and one of the three remaining tubes at normal height lost an illusory field and revealed a jagged hole and empty tube.

Sirius walked over to the completely immobile wizard whose face was reddening and peered in the display case. "He got through the first wave but missed the muted collapsing." Sirius walked back over and tapped his wand to the podium.

"I'm impressed," Harry said nodding with respect to the man he expected was another Unspeakable. A ripple of white magic crossed the room, pushing the frozen wizard into the black wall.

As the white curtain of magic passed through the people, they felt the pressure of their tubes lessen and their bodies relax.

Harry stared at the other two Ministry workers, measuring their worth. The two tubes shattered allowing them to stand from their seats.

"You can go out that door," Harry nodded towards the aurors who were leaving. "Or that one," he said with a motion towards the black wall.

The man and the woman hurried out the front door and it sealed shut behind them.

Sirius began again. "Now I know some of you may wonder why you work for the Ministry but are still here. The answer to that I'm afraid lies in the tattoo on your arm." He made a show of tapping his wand three times on the podium.

Thirteen more tubes began to grow up from the ground leaving nine people neck deep staring at the Death Eaters carted up to their fate. Three of the men began banging and punching the walls of their tubes. Spells reflected right back on them. One older woman was begging for sympathy.

"Yeah, we don't care," Sirius said, as another white wave of magic swept from the east wall. "Tell it to the aurors."

This time, tubes and all were pushed across the room, breaking against the black wall and sending all the people in them away.

“And then there were nine,” Sirius pushed a button and then all the rest of the people still seated partly underground were raised back up to the proper height.

Two tubes shattered as Harry greeted, “Albus, PJ. I don’t recall your names on the guest list but I believe you may be able to help us out here.”

The two older men moved over to stand next to Harry.

A portly gentlemen looked at the other six people sitting by him before asking, “Out of curiosity, just *who* was on the guest list?”

“Just one name,” Harry happily informed them nodding his head towards the goblin. “Bloodthrust.”

The goblin standing off to the side smiled grotesquely looking much like his picture.

“Now I want to know,” Harry asked, still seated on the floor facing towards them, “just who would turn themselves into uninvited trespassers of an Ancient and Noble Lord’s home.”

There was some noticeable shifting from the people realizing what they’d managed to walk into.

“Albus? PJ?” Harry asked. “Do either of you recognize these people?”

“David Monroe,” Albus said nodding to one of the two gentlemen in the back left row.

David inclined his head. “It’s been a while, Albus.”

“Master Monroe,” Albus explained, “is a world renowned mental healer and he’s been in charge of Frank Longbottom’s care. I do not know why he’d be interested in this auction.”

“That’s Lord Charles Marbury,” Peter Potter said pointing to a graying man with a shiny nose. “He’s an alcoholic.”

Harry looked at Peter curiously.

Peter shrugged. "I don't know what kind of details will help you."

"Harry," Sirius called out in warning. He was looking through a charmed pair of omnioculars. "Harry, you might want to take a look at this."

Sirius walked over towards Harry and reached right through Harry's tube, handing him the omnioculars.

Harry canceled the charm on his eyes and looked through the omnioculars. His first thought was to wonder why the hell Sirius had turned on the clothes-less feature in a room of old men. His next thoughts were all about the man sitting next to David Monroe with a very familiar tattoo on his arm.

"Huh," Harry said, handing the omnioculars back to Sirius. He cast another magical sight spell on his eyes and recognized a line of magic around the Death Eater's neck. Both the man and David Monroe next to him were wearing necklaces that fooled magical sight. It was only because Harry had used the same thing when he traded for Dobby that he recognized the slight but unique effect.

Harry glanced over making sure Sirius was still alert and ready. He cocked his head staring at the two men. "How the hell did you manage to sneak a Dark Mark through there?"

David Monroe stood up calmly from his seat and walked straight through the tube surrounding him. "I'm afraid that was my doing."

The man with the Dark Mark also left his tube and moved to stand protectively at David Monroe's back.

Albus stiffened and drew his wand while Peter took a step away from everyone.

All the remaining tubes shattered and the front doors opened. Harry just stared at David Monroe waiting for him to move. "I must humbly ask that everyone not invited to please leave now while I'm giving you a choice."

Albus watched the others hurry out the front door and leaned over, "You don't mean me, do you, Harry?"

Harry saw David Monroe give a slight shake of his head and answered, "I'll catch up with you later, Albus."

Albus frowned. "I'm afraid I'm going to-" He stopped suddenly as a wave of white magic crested out from the right wall.

Proving just how spry he still was, Albus galloped three brisk steps and dove headfirst out the front door, rather than allow the wave to push him through the black wall. The doors sealed shut behind him and Albus was stuck outside looking in. "Bugger."

Peter just laughed at him.

Inside the building remained only the two Lord Blacks, two necklace- charmed protected identities, and one bored looking goblin.

Harry turned to the goblin. "I don't mean to be rude, Bloodthrust, but would you-?"

"Bah," Bloodthrust grumbled as he turned to stalk out the front door. "I expected more from you, wizard. One measly death? Bah."

As soon as Bloodthrust was gone, two more tubes appeared boxing in the two unknown men.

"Who are you?" Harry said to the one with the Dark Mark while keeping an eye on the other. "I recognize the magic of your necklaces. I know those aren't your true faces. So I'm asking you, who are you?"

The man with the Dark Mark was about to remove his necklace when the glass tube around David Monroe shattered.

"Alan, wait," the supposed healer said.

Harry immediately realized he was right in that it wasn't coincidence that Alan Weston had been in possession of a horcrux.

"It'll be easier if I tell you my story," David Monroe explained, drawing Harry and Sirius' attention his way.

"You can start by removing that necklace," Harry said wanting to see this guy's face.

David Monroe frowned. "I think it may be easier-"

"Humor me," Harry urged strongly.

"Very well," David Monroe agreed. He tilted his head down and pulled the charmed-necklace over the top of his head.

Dark, messy hair was the first thing Harry could see. As the man lifted the necklace down his face, brilliant green eyes were staring back at Harry. The man's complexion got lighter and clearer. He was younger than David Monroe looked but it wasn't until the effect reached the superior smirk on his face that Harry recognized him.

Harry's brain processed it but his gearshift was stuck in neutral. He just stood there staring in shock. There were a million different things running through his mind. Each sudden insight led to another moment of clarity as another mystery unraveled.

"Fuck," Harry swore in realization. "Neville's really gone, isn't he?"

The man's pupils dilating were the only sign of surprise he showed. He had been startled at how quickly Harry reached that conclusion. "That's one way to put it."

"How else would you put it?" Harry snapped angrily.

The man nearly looked humble. "Sometimes I prefer to think he lives on through me."

"Harry?" Sirius said jumped in, staring at the man in confusion. "Did Voldemort have a kid and never tell anyone?"

"No," Harry replied, watching the man's every move. "But he did have a diary."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Sirius looked at the man and summarized his feelings on the subject. "What?"

Harry sighed in sadness. "It was the prophecy getting out, wasn't it?"

The man occasionally known as David Monroe nodded.

"What?" Sirius said, not following that at all. "Please, for all the slow people in the room like me and the Death Eater. What?"

"Speak for yourself, Lord Black," the Death Eater known as Alan Weston mumbled.

Sirius just stared at the Death Eater, daring him to give Sirius a reason to curse him.

"When Frank Longbottom let the prophecy get out, he opened the door for people to send Neville presents. Bloody hell," Harry said thinking back to his talk with Albus. "Why didn't anyone question it when a seven year old managed to cast an expansion charm in his backpack? It only made it that much harder to notice an old diary mixed in with all the other books."

The healthy, pleasant version of Tom Riddle shrugged. "He was the chosen one."

"Oh that's rich," Harry darkly chuckled. "Coming from you."

"So this guy ate Neville?" Sirius asked as he pointed at Tom and looked at Harry.

Tom waited for Harry to clarify, uncertain just how much Harry knew.

"Metaphysically, yes," Harry said with a nod. "The horcrux in the diary leeches the soul and life force from a naïve and innocent child and presto, new physical body in the real world for the horcrux to inhabit while little Neville's body gets cold and dies."

Sirius was still keeping his distance and pointing at the man. "I thought you said the diary had a teenage Tommy Junior."

Harry was watching Tom display some real emotions. "He sprung into the world a teenager, but that was back in, what, 88? So you're about 36 now?"

Tom made no effort to deny Harry's claim, instead he explored another avenue of conversation. "You really are from another world, aren't you?"

"Fuck," Sirius swore, still pointing at Tom. "Does everyone know about us? First Albus figures it out. Just the other day we discover Voldemort knows and now Tom Riddlebottom and his pet Death Eater are giving us shit? What the hell, Harry?"

"Tom Riddlebottom?" Harry repeated, glancing at the look of horror on Tom's face. "Oh that name's going to stick."

Tom softly mumbled, "As long as it's not on a t-shirt."

"Stop that," Harry ordered. "I'm having enough trouble reconciling the idea of a child murdering dark artifact with the mysterious fucker fighting the Dark Lord. You don't need to add in humility and a substandard sense of humor."

"If I may?" Tom politely interrupted. "I believe the Dark Lord discovered something while dueling you or shortly thereafter. It was then that he began to investigate parallel worlds. His investigation tipped off myself and most likely Albus. But I must say, until today, I didn't believe it was true."

Sirius was still pointing at Tom and looking at Harry helplessly. "Well shit."

"Relax Sirius," Harry said shifting his weight while watching Tom. "While I'd like it if you didn't get into the habit of just blurting that out, Tom here was already convinced after we knew so much about him."

Tom nodded silently.

“What I don’t get though is how he’s so... human. Or why he’s doing this.”

“Why?” Sirius repeated. “I’m just going to take a wild stab in the dark and say Dark Lords don’t play nice with other Dark Lords.”

Tom stood there calmly, willing to let them reason things out in front of him.

“Not just why he’s opposing Voldemort,” Harry said, noticing how tense but obedient the other Death Eater was. “But why he’s here and making himself so vulnerable to us.”

Tom saw they were waiting on him and admitted, “I’m here because I need your help and you won’t give it with anything short of full disclosure. Can we speak freely here and without interruption? I’m willing to tell you nearly anything, but I’m not prepared to extend the same courtesy to Headmaster Dumbledore.”

“Problems with Albus?” Harry questioned.

Tom shook his head. “He never gave me the benefit of the doubt when I was a student. I am reluctant to find out if he would understand my situation now.”

“What makes you think we’re any different,” Harry asked.

“You’re not giving me a choice in the matter,” Tom explained. “But I know you won’t trust me easily, so I have a suggestion.”

Harry and Sirius exchanged a glance. “We’re listening.”

Tom squared his shoulders to address Harry. “Are you familiar with the charms of brotherhood?”

“You gotta be fucking kiddin’ me,” Harry grumbled in disbelief. “You want a charm of brotherhood?”

Sirius remembered when Harry explained his plan to get one from Albus and wasn’t sure how much to read into That Fucker attempting to extract the same from Harry.

"I'm not willing to condone veritaserum," Tom argued. "And I doubt you would trust the results if I did agree to it."

"Perhaps you should remember you're in no position to negotiate," Harry said as the living wards sprung to life encasing both uninvited men in giant solid blocks of crystal up to the neck.

"I'm far from helpless," Tom said coldly, letting his dark side show for the first time. "And will not continue extending this kindness indefinitely."

The crystal prisons around the two men began to liquefy and melt with no visible motion from Tom as he stared down Harry.

Harry was reminded of just who this adversary was and remained alert and vigilant. "True. But as I'm sure you've noticed all of your attempts to wrest control of the living wards have failed miserably. Though I find it interesting that you and Albus go through very similar processes of trial and error."

Tom's harsh look faded into one of humble embarrassment. "I must admit I'm perplexed at that. You've protected yourself in way that eludes me." He slowly and obviously withdrew his wand and began to trace magic across his fingers. "I swear on my existence that I will not intentionally reveal either of you are from another world nor that you are the Death Eater Bandits, for as long as you permit me the courtesy of a charm of brotherhood." He finished by extending his magically glowing hand towards Harry.

"Your existence?" Harry questioned, already beginning to cast the same magic over his fingers.

"My life and magic are debatable topics as to whether they are mine," Tom explained. "Existence felt the most fitting."

Harry clasped hands and sealed a charm of brotherhood with Tom Riddle. It was a concept Harry never would have believed just a few hours earlier. "Agreed."

Both men felt the magic of the charm reacting and watched each other for any signs of deception.

Tom amicably broke the tense silence. "You are certain Albus isn't listening in?"

"Not certain," Harry shook his head. "Though I highly doubt he is. I can tell you what he's trying right now is going to fail, but he is a brilliant wizard."

"How do you know it's going to fail?" Tom inquired, knowing the likelihood of crossing wands was much lower now with the charm of brotherhood between them.

"He's basing everything off an inaccurate assumption," Harry said feeling slightly proud of his plan. "An assumption you also made."

"Care to enlighten us?" Tom asked. He noticed Alan looked uncomfortable and knew he needed to move this conversation along. When he saw the hesitancy from Harry, he added, "I've no intentions of attacking you or your wards. I'm just curious."

Harry sensed truth from the charm of brotherhood but common sense still told him not to trust this man. "I think we're getting away from the story you need to tell," Harry said, producing the usual pair of recliners for himself and Sirius.

"Understood," Tom genially replied. A slight twist of his wand produced a pair of finely crafted chairs for himself and Alan, copying the Lord Blacks. "As Harry indicated, one of the most important events leading to my existence was the prophecy getting out.

"After the Dark Lord... killed the both of you, he became intensely focused on destroying Neville Longbottom. For years he was thwarted by the protections surrounding the Longbottoms. Stories of his persistence led into rumors of a prophesized savior. When Frank Longbottom confirmed those rumors and leaked the details of the actual prophecy, Voldemort ordered all of his followers to get Longbottom using any means necessary."

Tom was speaking calmly, like a history professor patiently lecturing his class. "Fortunately for me, Lucius Malfoy had been entrusted with a diary that would ensnare any who used it. He did not know of the

significance of the object, only that it was a tool for which he could earn the Dark Lord's favor."

"I," Tom paused and hesitantly admitted, "I did what I was created to do. I tricked a child into trusting me and ensnared him with promises of the greatness he could achieve. It didn't take long before Neville had made me whole again. I took his body with me and went to find the Dark Lord."

Harry felt genuine emotion from the brotherhood charm and was constantly comparing this version with his memories of the diary from his old world. "This is so fucking surreal."

"Hah!" Sirius exclaimed. "Not so much fun on this side, is it? A little dose of your own medicine."

"Excuse me?" Harry inquired. "Just what is that supposed to mean?"

"You know," Sirius said uneasily noticing how similar his godson and the strangely dignified version of the Dark Lord looked and acted. "That tone of voice where you're saying a bunch of stupid shit that's way beyond belief but still makes a twisted kind of sense."

Harry just stared at Sirius for a moment.

Sirius crossed his arms and stuck his fingers out to the side wiggling them wildly. "Invisible freaky arms?" He put a finger on his forehead and motioned it flipping up. "Avada Ke-*doink!*"

"Sirius!" Harry snapped. "Perhaps you'd care to share a few of your own secrets instead of mine?"

Sirius gulped. "Never mind."

Harry turned back towards the two others who were failing to keep the confusion off their faces. "Continue, Mr. Riddlebottom."

Tom frowned slightly at the name but resumed his tale. "When I located the Dark Lord, he was furious. I'm not sure why, but I stayed back and observed him. I wanted to see what I'd become, what kind of wizard and leader I was. Suffice it to say, I was disappointed."

“Electing not to approach him, instead I just watched for a few days. I saw Death Eaters cowering in fear, many of them regretting their decision to join me. I saw myself taking pleasure in punishing them. Dispensing all the blame for failures on them and never admitting my own faults. After a while, I came to a sad conclusion about the horcrux process.”

Harry saw Tom had paused and was waiting. Harry glanced at Sirius before stating, “Feel free to pretend we’re enraptured and are encouraging you to continue.”

Tom looked disappointed but explained, “When I was made, when Voldemort made his first horcrux, I believed that I’d figured out how to make multiple horcruxes and avoid the most damaging side effect, insanity.”

He took a breath and asserted, “I’ve come to discover that I was wrong. And thus by definition, I’m the only sane piece of Tom Riddle left in this world.”

“You hear that Sirius?” Harry mocked while thinking Tom was way too calm about this. “There’s a sane piece.”

“Yeah,” Sirius caught on to what Harry was doing. “The piece that ate Neville. You know, the good piece.”

Alan Weston was bristling, clearly unhappy with the Lord Blacks, but he continued to be a civil guest.

Tom smiled sadly. “Nevertheless, I felt uncomfortable revealing my existence to the Dark Lord I’d become. I discovered Lucius was the one who sent me to Neville. He was waiting to hear if his use of the Dark Lord’s ‘cursed diary’ was successful before sharing his plan with Voldemort. So I relieved him of those memories and planted a fake diary into his vault.”

Harry saw Tom had paused again and doubtfully asked, “So that’s it? You saw him being a Mr. Meany-pants and decided you’d rather frolic under a rainbow through fields of daisies with the bunnies?”

"It's not that simple and you know it. I'd appreciate it if you stopped trying to bait me, but I understand if you feel you must." Tom was rewarded by a couple of narrowed pairs of eyes and calmly explained, "I didn't oppose him at first. I wasn't helping him, but occasionally I'd toss in a new element into his plans to see how he'd respond. Simple obstacles a rational mind would overcome. Encourage a little token resistance when he wasn't expecting any. It was months before I accepted a disturbing truth: I'm much smarter than Voldemort."

Sirius didn't sound nearly as sarcastic when he commented, "Says the man fighting a stalemate from the shadows for twenty years."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, showing more curiosity than anything else. "He's held you off it seems. What makes you so sure you're that much smarter?"

Tom crossed his legs and pondered the answer. "I know if I were him, I would've figured out my identity by now. And like I said, I didn't oppose him at first. It wasn't until I discovered a Death Eater who'd gone so far as to fake his own death in an effort to get out from Voldemort's control that I began to actively oppose him." He glanced over at Alan, as the other man began to fidget in his seat.

Harry shook his head in spite of what the charm of brotherhood was telling him. "I'm having a lot of trouble buying this change-of-heart load. You were already a cruel bastard at 17. Hell, you made a horcrux."

Tom nodded. "It is a foul and dark magic, I agree. And while the costs of doing such an act may seem too high to you, the allure of a magic so powerful is undeniable. For what little it is worth, the part of the process I recall bothered me sufficiently to swear off the necessity of making more. I still have not uncovered what changed Voldemort's mind but I do know it was more than a decade before he made the second."

"And you? You've not been having any second thoughts?" Harry said, unable to resist the pun.

Tom shook his head. "Even if I sought to uncover a way around the known limitations, it would most likely cost me my rationality. I take

solace from the knowledge that I cannot make one. I do not have to worry about the temptation because it is not an option for me.”

Harry bit his tongue, thinking of the eerily similar words he’d used with others in regards to his defeat of his Voldemort.

Sirius saw something about that had rattled Harry and drew attention his way. “So we’re just supposed to accept this change of heart stuff you’re shoveling?”

“It wasn’t a change of heart or pity for the Death Eater I’d just met,” Tom earnestly answered, “as much as it was further disappointment in Voldemort.

“Here was a man who had faked his death but was unaware of the soul magic in the Dark Mark. Voldemort knew he was not dead and was torturing him, most likely in the same way he tortured your Bellatrix. I reached the same conclusions you did in that the Mark was permanent, but ownership could be transferred.

“As I unraveled the layers of the Dark Mark, I discovered a number of other weak spells blended into the soul magic. Compulsion and obedience charms, secondary and tertiary leeches on their magic. It was everything I despised in my youth. A follower, an ally, or an emissary should be able to think for his or herself, and at full strength, without undue influence. Obedient weak drones may be easier to control but are a significant waste of resources.

“And in spite of all those subtle corruptive magics, people were still willing to fake their deaths to get away.”

Tom finished shaking his head in sadness. “I admit I felt a little lost then. Fortunately the Death Eater I’d saved and whose Mark I controlled was like a stray puppy that I’d made the mistake of feeding once.”

Alan cleared his throat loudly before patting his chest innocently.

“We got acquainted with each other while he healed and he opened my eyes to an opportunity before us,” Tom continued. “I had a chance to fix all the mistakes Voldemort had made and be the sort of wizard I

knew I could. Inspire the people and remind them of why they followed me in the first place.”

“Oh lovely,” Sirius summarized. “A glass-half-full Dark Lord.”

“Not a Dark Lord,” Tom said shaking his head. “I’ve seen where that path leads. No, I intend to follow the path last taken by Albus Dumbledore.”

Harry and Sirius exchanged wary looks.

“I will rise from the glory of saving the wizarding world and defeating the Dark Lord,” Tom said matter-of-factly. “And I need your help to do it.”

Sirius could barely believe the audacity of this man. “How’s that charm working, Harry?”

“He’s telling the truth,” Harry assured him. “Or at least what he believes it to be.”

Tom glanced regrettably towards Alan Weston before turning back towards both Lord Blacks. “Considering your noble and ancient status in this world, I feel I should mention the Death Eater, whom I saved and has helped me to forge my own path, is Regulus Black.”

Sirius and Harry both froze in surprise. Sirius just kept staring at Tom, waiting for him to say something more about his bizarro little brother. Harry’s gaze moved from Tom over to the suddenly nervous and fidgeting Alan Weston.

Harry lifted his arm and pointed at Alan. “You’re…”

“Regulus is alive?” Sirius blurted out finally.

Tom nodded with an amused smile.

Harry saw Alan was still avoiding eye contact. “You’re-”

“Harry!” Sirius interrupted, pulling his godson’s arm down. “He’s talking about Reggie. I think this is more important.”

Tom opened his mouth but was interrupted by Sirius' yelp of pain as he slapped a hand over his eye.

"Dammit Harry!"

"Maybe if you'd let me speak," Harry snapped. "You might learn something."

"I'm talking to Riddlebottom," Sirius argued, pulling his hand down when his eye stopped stinging.

"Sirius," Harry said tiredly, noticing even Alan was looking at Sirius incredulously. "What kind of retarded Death Eater is going to have a muggle dryer?"

Sirius looked over at Harry curiously, before he gasped in comprehension. He slowly turned his head to see the Death Eater had removed his charmed necklace.

"Why you gotta call me Reggie?" he said in irritation. "You know how much I hate that."

"Reggie!" Sirius exclaimed, his face splitting into a bright grin. He pulled the reluctant and oddly older man but sort of younger brother into a hug. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

Regulus looked at Sirius. "I had no clue who you were until after you'd broken into my place, snatched the Slytherin locket, and *stolen my dryer!*"

"Oh," Sirius recalled his many gently warmed bathrobes. "Right."

Regulus shrugged indifferently. "And even since then, you've pretty much been a prick."

"Shit," Sirius swore.

Harry's face split into a victorious grin at Regulus' blunt assessment. "Did you hear-"

“Shut up, Harry,” Sirius snapped, knowing full well that he was on the receiving end of what he’d said to James.

Harry started to laugh. “Oh, oh, oh-”

The words were more insistent as Sirius again said, “Shut up, Harry.”

Harry grinned at his godfather when he was startled to feel genuine happiness through the charm of brotherhood. He turned to Tom, who was smiling back at him.

Sirius and Regulus easily fell into their own private conversation, both excited to speak to something close to the brother they thought they’d never see again.

“So Alan Weston,” Harry said turning towards Tom.

“He couldn’t continue being Regulus Black,” Tom replied as he levitated his chair over next to Harry. “Why don’t we let those two catch up? It will allow us to take advantage of a little privacy and the protection of our charm of brotherhood.”

Harry uncertainly watched the privacy dome surround him and Tom Riddle. “Uh-huh.”

“You doubt my intentions,” Tom said, prompting an earnest discussion.

Harry was on guard but found himself beginning to believe and trust the words of Tom. “It was more the unsubtle way you revealed Regulus’ identity. Divide and conquer is the next stage of your master sales pitch?”

“I’m going to be honest with you, Harry,” Tom urged while adding strength and resolve to the charm of brotherhood.

Harry sent a burst of magic to match into the charm and smirked. “Is that your way of saying you’ve been lying thus far?”

Tom shook his head. “There will always be differences in the truth you hear, the truth you can accept, and the truth as I see it. I’ve been

honest so far, but that was primarily to ensure your cooperation to get to this point.”

Harry nodded and listened attentively.

“I’m not a light wizard,” Tom said, smiling at Harry’s snort. “Nor are you a dark wizard. But if we work together... there’s nothing beyond our reach.”

Harry was amazed to realize this supremely confident wizard respected him for some odd reason. It was most definitely a change from any facet of Voldemort he’d seen before.

“I’m not talking about taking the world by force,” Tom continued. He paused and considered the possibility. “We’d probably manage that one a lot better than Voldemort has, but I know your conscience wouldn’t ever allow it. I’m talking about shaping the world we live in. A revolution known only to us.”

Harry looked at Tom dubiously. “That sounds like an awful lot of work.”

Tom laughed. “I’ve heard the vitriol you spout towards blood superiority and just about everything hereditary in our world. We share views on greatness and the beauty and power of true magic.

“When Voldemort falls, just about everything standing in our way can be painted with his brush and tainted by his association. The ills of our world can be healed and our lives can be whatever we make of them. If we work against each other, neither of us will accomplish a fraction of what we could by working together. Albus Dumbledore’s time has passed. It’s our turn, Harry.”

Harry was beginning to see a side of Tom Riddle that would attract others. He was a man with a vision and the power to back up his words. “You seem to be presuming an awful lot.”

Tom looked off into the distance. “If a junkie could foresee what his life would be, if he could see what he would look like at his worst moment, do you think he would ever take that first hit? Knowing where it would lead him, would he ever start?”

"Voldemort's not a junkie," Harry argued.

"No," Tom agreed. "But he's not who I want to be. Voldemort is the madness, I am the man. That's not someone I'll ever allow myself to be. And I hope it's not someone you'll ever let me become."

The brotherhood charm was as strong as ever. Harry clarified, "You want me to be your dark magic nanny?"

"You really infuriate Albus, don't you?" Tom said with a shake of his head. "You know what I am, right?"

Harry could think of several answers to that question but nodded silently.

"If Voldemort ever figured out who I am, or rather what I am, then he could have a control over me that I'd be powerless to resist."

Harry hadn't even considered those implications. "That's why protecting your identity is so important."

Tom nodded. "There's a way that I could be freed in case Voldemort ever got me, but it requires a horcrux. That was why Alan had the locket. Neither of us appreciated losing that as I had to move Sirius Black's skull into a place where Alan could access it."

"So you do have the skull," Harry said. "That's... that's all of them, right?"

"I'm going to try and lure the Dark Lord into a trap in about a week," Tom assured him.

"Really?"

"Your public announcement of Voldemort's horcruxes has backed me into a perilous position and one I must address sooner rather later."

"Oh," Harry realized. "Sorry about that."

Tom chuckled darkly. "Your sincerity is just oozing from the charm of brotherhood."

Harry shrugged, knowing he couldn't exactly convince him otherwise. "Why'd you show Reggie Sirius' skull instead of the ring? Just to fuck with him?"

"Contrary to your experiences with Voldemorts and Tom Riddles," Tom chided. "I do have feelings and am not a cruel, heartless man."

Harry felt slightly ashamed and saw Tom was surprised to sense the emotion through the bond.

Tom twisted the invisible ring on his left hand. "No, I'm sorry to say the ring is no longer a horcrux, thus the skull was the only active one I possessed. Had I known you were going to announce the other three horcruxes up for auction I would have spared Alan the uncomfortable experience."

Harry looked at the Slytherin family ring featuring a shining emerald resting in the middle of a silver Ouroboros. Golden claws decorated the sides holding the very lifelike snake in place. "You managed to remove the fragment without destroying the ring?"

Tom slid the ring up and down his finger a couple times. "That was not my intention, but yes."

Harry felt the nudge from the charm and inquired. "And just what was your intention?"

With a sad look, Tom explained, "I thought perhaps I could absorb the other soul fragments and become closer to a whole person. It was a mistake I was lucky to survive. I'm not going to go into it now, but the other fragments are vile and the horcruxes must be destroyed."

Harry could tell whatever happened was a big reason for his current attitude. He glanced over towards the protected display with the lots for the auction. "You sure you can't extract the soul pieces? Those are some pretty valuable old toys."

Tom shook his head. "I'm sorry, but there's no controlling where the soul fragment goes if you destroy its bindings. The one in the ring came after me and I foolishly tried to accept it."

"I've come to believe that it was Neville, and his soul that saved me and called for help."

"Neville's soul called for help?"

"That is no ordinary affliction Frank Longbottom suffers from," Tom stated darkly. "He is a good man and a good father."

"Hang on," Harry interjected. "You're telling me the soul fragment is in Frank?"

"No," Tom insisted. "It's gone. I made certain of that. But it didn't go quietly."

"You fuckers are sons of bitches, ain't ya?" Harry said recalling the horcruxes he'd destroyed.

"It attracted too much of the wrong kind of attention too. It's also the reason Alan volunteered to rejoin the Death Eaters." Tom was fiddling with the ring and constant reminder. "Even the ring hated it. It's my understanding that the ring rejected Voldemort when he put it on. And for that reason, to spite it, he turned the ring into a horcrux."

"It doesn't seem to mind you," Harry commented.

Tom shrugged. "I suspect it trusts me about as much as you do. It refused me the lordship of the Slytherin line but recognizes me as the Head of the family."

"Speaking of Slytherin," Harry questioned. "How do you plan to reconcile our differences on pureblood supremacy?"

"Differences?" Tom said. "I assumed we shared somewhat similar ideas on the value of blood." He saw Harry's frown and added, "Voldemort's only using the pureblood agenda as a means to an end. I believe preserving the ancient bloodlines are important, particularly the genetic gifts and familial magics, but I could care less whether your parents, grand-parents, and great grand-parents were all purebloods or not."

"You don't care?"

“Harry, my magical relatives were all inbred weak idiots. My mother was two steps from being a squib, but as soon as some fresh blood was introduced to such a noble and ancient bloodline, even muggle blood...” Tom trailed off and shrugged. “I may not be very humble, but I am quite intelligent and I’m easily the most powerful wizard of my generation.

“The truth is that the most powerful politically, financially, and sometimes magically tend to flock to the pureblood banner. A necessary evil Voldemort is all too eager to exploit. In the world after his fall, we can oppose issues of purity by associating them with him.”

“So you oppose it?” Harry clarified.

Tom shook his head. “I believe in the importance of history. Families like the Potters or the Blacks. You’re the result of a muggleborn added to the Potter line, a half-blood like myself. Blood purity doesn’t matter, but the bloodlines do.”

“That doesn’t sound very much like your most famous ancestor.”

Tom looked up sadly. “He lived in a very different time. And I suspect history has not been kind to the Slytherin legacy. I know you’ve mocked the unchecked hereditary seats in the Wizengamot. Maybe it’s time to catch up to fourteenth century muggles and institute a House of Commons for elected Wizengamot seats?”

Harry looked at Tom warily. “This is your private little revolution?”

“I like to think of it as our revolution. Intelligent, rational wizards like us should be able to agree on mutually beneficial changes.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “It still sounds like a lot of work.”

Tom wore a predatory smile. “Don’t worry. I’ve got ambition enough for both of us.”

Harry let out a small sigh. “So what kind of help are you looking for?”

Tom looked up hopefully.

“I’m not saying you’re getting it,” Harry diplomatically offered. “Just wondering what you want from us.”

“Nothing life threatening,” Tom assured him. “But I need all of the horcruxes destroyed before I can kill the Dark Lord.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but that sounds suicidal.”

A ghost of a smile crossed his face. “Forgive me. I need all of the *other* horcruxes destroyed. Then when I kill Voldemort, I can capture what remains and lock it away.”

“Lock it away?” Harry repeated skeptically.

Tom nodded sadly. “As long as I exist, he can’t move on. He’ll be powerless, bodiless, and locked in a prison of my own design, but he will exist.”

Harry frowned. “I’m not a fan of imprisoning Voldemort. He’s a bloody, tricky bugger, even if he is insane.”

“The only other option is, as you said, suicide.” Tom turned to face Harry and showed his dedication to survival. “And I am not willing to accept that.”

Harry got the message loud and clear but didn’t have to like it. “So that’s it? You just want us to give you our priceless little toys so you can break them? You’re not asking us to back you up when you fight him?”

“No, I don’t need physical assistance, but I do need your help with legitimacy.”

Harry smiled distastefully. “Makes sense.”

Tom nodded. “David Monroe, renowned for his skills at healing the mind, suddenly overpowering and destroying the Dark Lord would be hard for many to believe. But when I mention that my good friend Lord Harry Black has been known to keep me on my toes, then it’s far less surprising that I defeated Voldemort.”

“Bugger,” Harry said. “I knew beating the crap out of him in public was going to come around to bite me in the ass.”

Tom smiled. “If you want, I’m willing for you to ‘have played a large role in the defeat of Voldemort,’ but I get the feeling you do not wish for the fame or the glory. It’s going to earn Alan some recognition and amnesty. Perhaps Sirius would like an Order of Merlin third class?”

Harry looked over and saw Sirius smiling brightly while Regulus was rolling his eyes. “Maybe, maybe not.”

Tom saw Harry’s eyes wandering and canceled the privacy dome surrounding them. “So do we have an agreement? You provide the horcruxes and validation while I handle all the other pesky details?”

Harry pretended to slowly nod before stopping. “No.”

“No?” Tom asked in surprise.

Sirius and Regulus walked over. “Reggie gave me most of the highlights. Destroy the horcruxes, kill the Dark Lord. He claims the whole thing will be over in a matter of days.”

Regulus looked like he didn’t mind the unwelcome childhood nickname as much as he had before. “Did I hear you right, *no*?”

Harry nodded and stood over by his godfather. “If we were being nice I can see us returning the locket to you guys. But we busted our ass for those other two. Padfoot, you were almost killed. And do I have to remind you of all the pussy that damn cup cost you?”

Sirius nodded in support of Harry, even if he didn’t agree with him on this.

Harry could tell Sirius didn’t care but insisted, “We’ve invested too much to just give up the horcruxes for free.”

“This is to end the reign of the Dark Lord,” Regulus snapped. “This isn’t about profit.”

Harry smirked at Tom. "Really? Because all I've been hearing is how this is going to catapult David Monroe to being the apple of the wizarding world's eye. The next Albus Dumbledore. The way I see it, Tom is planning to reap the windfall and in the process give me a few more headaches dropping my name as he sees fit."

Regulus looked upset but Tom just laughed out loud. "Damn Harry. I had you pegged as a Gryffindor but now I'm not so sure. What was your house at Hogwarts?"

Harry's mind recalled a distant memory of when he was just eleven and a hat spoke to him for the first time. He grabbed onto Sirius' arm and walked backwards, keeping his eyes and body facing Tom.

Regulus glanced at Tom uncertainly. "You'd think they wouldn't need a conference to answer that one."

Tom watched Harry and Sirius yapping away behind a silencing charm and saw both of them grinning dangerously. "I think they've come up with a price for the horcruxes."

Harry and Sirius walked back over to the other pair. Harry explained, "If you must know I was a Gryffindor but that was more my choice seeing as Albus made sure I came to Hogwarts believing all Slytherins to be evil."

"Hmm," Tom said, feeling the charm of brotherhood tingling in the back of his head. "Something tells me you should have been a Slytherin."

Sirius was smiling. "Funny you should say that..."

"We've decided on a fair trade," Harry explained calmly, thinking this would be a real test of this Tom Riddle. "You get to destroy the horcruxes and in exchange you name me the heir to the Slytherin line and pass the family ring on down."

Regulus blinked at the unexpected offer. He frowned. "And what do you plan to do if the ring rejects you?"

Tom had a calculating look on his face as he stared at Harry. "It won't reject him. I've no doubt the ring will jump at the chance."

"What?" Regulus asked.

"The only direct ancestors left are fractured souls unable to produce heirs," Tom explained, keeping his eyes on Harry. "The line is dying. Harry has already been accepted as a noble and ancient Lord once. He's young, powerful, he's defeated a Dark Lord, and he may be the only other parselmouth in the UK."

Tom was fiddling with the ring on his finger. He was disappointed in himself for not having thought of this before. It would make a lot of his future plans easier but it would give Harry further power over him. "And just what do you plan to do if you are Lord Slytherin?"

Harry sensed none of the outrage he half-expected and saw Tom wasn't dismissing the idea out of hand. "I suppose considering Voldemort, you could say I'll be restoring the name to one synonymous with greatness. But if we're being really honest with ourselves, I'll probably just use it to piss as many people off as I can. Albus will be miserable, I'm sure."

Tom's lips thinned into a tight smile as he slipped the ring off his finger and held it up. A glimmer of white magic flashed through his fingertips. "I must ask that you keep this a secret until after Voldemort is defeated."

Harry and Sirius exchanged a looks of surprise that Tom was willing to agree to their offer.

Tom was reassured by their surprise. He held the ring out. "Are you prepared to accept your new title, my heir?"

"Shit, you're not kidding," Harry mumbled. He thought over his spontaneous plan just a moment longer before pulling off his Black family ring. He accepted the Slytherin ring, glanced over at Sirius' fearful look, and slipped it on his finger.

The glistening emerald flickered black and white as a tiny golden snake appeared inside the jewel. It slithered around and froze in the shape of the letter S, centered in the emerald.

“Lord Slytherin,” Sirius greeted with a bright smile.

“Lord Black,” Harry greeted back.

“Lord Slytherin,” Sirius repeated, liking the sound of it.

“Lord Black,” Harry agreed, looking over at Tom and Regulus. He turned to Sirius and showed him the Black family ring.

Sirius caught on to the unasked question and nodded.

Harry tossed the ring to Regulus and told him, “I’m not expecting much but it’s worth a shot.”

Regulus glanced at Tom who shrugged in response. Regulus slipped the Black family ring onto his finger and it quickly resized to a smaller ring, indicative of a family member, not a Lord.

Sirius grinned at Harry. “My little brother is older than I am.”

“I’m not calling you my Lord,” Regulus warned Sirius. “And you owe me some restitution for my washer-dryer combo.”

Harry smirked at Tom. “You can call me your Lord if you want to.”

“This,” Tom said motioning between them. “This right here is the reason I hesitated so long.”

“Come on, Padfoot,” Harry said jerking his head towards Regulus and Tom. “Let’s be nice to our loyal subjects and allow them to kiss their Lords’ rings.”

“Now that we’ve finished our business, will you answer a few questions?” Tom gently asked.

Harry nodded.

“How did you defeat your Voldemort?”

“Oh no,” Harry said shaking his head. “I may never answer that one and certainly not the day we meet.”

Tom knew he wasn't going to get the answer to that one but hoped asking it would make Harry more willing to answer others. “What made you ask for the Slytherin title?”

“My sorting,” Harry fondly recalled. “The Sorting Hat told me Slytherin would help me on the way to greatness. I said no back then but... second chances, right?”

Tom smiled at unsubtle reminder. “Any advice you can give me based on your original world?”

Harry and Sirius looked at each other.

Sirius answered first. “If you gotta kill a baby, always use the killing curse.”

Harry grinned. “If you're unsure, it's safe to assume it's a one-time one-way portkey.”

“The worst thing you can do,” Sirius insisted, “is to overestimate your opponent. Trust me. They're always untalented and lucky. And alone.”

“Matching tattoos to easily identify your followers are a must.”

“It never hurts to reveal all your plans and leave your opponents in a complicated death trap. It's safe to assume it worked. No need to stay and watch.”

“If you ever meet a snake named Nagini, just run the other way.”

Tom looked at Regulus. “They're mocking me, aren't they?”

“Picked up on that, did you?” Regulus grinned back.

Tom accepted the good natured ribbing as a very positive sign. “I don't suppose you'd care to expand on your survival of the killing curse?”

“Care to?” Harry repeated. “Nope, sorry.”

Tom nodded. “Perhaps then you’ll share just how you’ve managed to keep the living wards uninterrupted?”

“Still haven’t figured it out?”

Tom shook his head. “You said I’ve made an inaccurate assumption?”

Harry glanced around the room. He turned to Sirius. “It might be better to just let them take the display case.”

“That’s what I figured,” Sirius nodded thinking of all the tracking and spying charms built in. He walked over towards the mirror and floating display case, casting a spell. The case sunk down into the surface of the mirror. Sirius turned to Tom and Regulus. “I’m going to want this back.”

Harry had also moved over, breaking down the black portal covering the west wall. He looked over his shoulder at Tom. “Now have you figured it out?”

Tom tilted his head. “This is the first you’ve shown your back to me, but I do not see the significance.”

Harry pocketed the ward stones that had powered both walls and looked smug. “You’ve been acting under the assumption that I am the sentient anchor to the living wards.”

“I’ve seen the magic flowing into you,” Tom mused aloud. “Unless... you’ve cloaked someone on your back?”

“A sentient anchor only has to be capable of making decisions,” Harry said. “No strain from casting or maintaining the wards.”

“Are you not willing to reveal who you trust so much?”

Harry felt the nudge in his back and explained. “No one will see a house elf that doesn’t want to be seen. And it’s hard to find a

willingness to protect or loyalty stronger than from a house elf with a Master who treats them well.”

Dobby’s head faded into view, peering over Harry’s shoulder. He smiled and nodded. “Hi, Mr. Fucker,” before a snap of his fingers faded him back into invisibility.

“The magic appears to come from you,” Tom commented. “And from the house elf bond you can convey all your intentions without a word. I’ll admit I may not have ever considered that.”

Regulus saw no one else seemed fazed but had to ask. “Did that elf just call him Mr. Fucker?” When no one answered him, he turned to Tom. “Can I call you Mr. Fucker?”

Tom paused. “Yes, provided you never call me Riddlebottom.”

Regulus started and stopped a couple times. “I’m going to need to think on this.”

Sirius had finished deactivating many of the security measures on the mirror and display. He carried the large mirror over towards them. “If anything happens the entire case gets portkeyed into a subspace. Every layer of the wards contains the same spell with it.” He lifted up a small rock. “Here’s the stone needed to access the subspace and alter the wards. Mind you there is no off switch. You have to be working the stone, while you remove the case.”

Regulus looked at Tom assuring him he didn’t follow that explanation in the slightest.

“Thank you,” Tom said pocketing the stone and accepting the mirror. He looked at protections on the mirror. “This is an impressive piece of magic. It’s nice to see someone applying their mind and talent.”

“Really?” Regulus asked at the unsubtle jab. “You want to go there now?”

“I know how competitive you tried to be with your brother in your youth,” Tom chided. “And now, here’s something a lot like him... and he knows wards as well as anyone.”

“And he has warm sheets,” Sirius added.

Tom sighed as he saw Regulus was nearing another temper tantrum.

Harry looked up and warned, “You might want to put your necklaces back on because I’m about to-” He was interrupted as the entire building began shaking and the strength of gravity doubled momentarily.

“Living wards are down,” Harry said, standing up from the rune inscribed corner of the floor.

The faces of David Monroe and the unknown other man were back in place just as the front doors whipped open and Albus came running in, wand up.

He swung his arm around the room, surprised to find all four people perfectly healthy and calm.

“Just a second,” Harry said, closing his eyes in concentration. “Okay, portkey and apparition are down.”

“Harry?” Albus asked letting his wand arm relax. “What’s going on?”

“Good day, Albus,” David Monroe said, gripping onto the mirror. “Harry, we’ll be in touch.”

Two consecutive pops indicated Tom and Regulus had apparated away, taking the horcruxes with them.

Albus recognized the significance of the frame they left with and turned around in horror. “What have you done?”

“I just took the portkey and apparition wards down. You think it’s a bad idea? You’re right. It is a bad idea. I’ll just put them back up.”

Albus’ thoughts of chasing after the two others vanished and he looked at Harry in disappointment. “I thought this was all for show.”

Harry stuck his head out the front door and saw no signs of aurors waiting to pounce. “Everyone gone?”

Albus nodded. "What happened to your assurances the items were safe?"

"They are safe," Harry simply stated. "PJ left too?"

Albus frowned. "He was the last to leave more than half an hour ago. Did you deceive Monroe and convince him that he has them?"

"No. Listen, we caught thirty something Death Eaters," Harry reminded with a jerk of his thumb. "For what it's worth, this is not how I expected my day to go at all. But it wasn't the kind of offer you refuse."

Albus shook his head in confusion. "Why would you put yourself in a position to allow anyone to blackmail you over something as important as this?"

Harry was smiling confidently. "Do I look like I've been blackmailed?"

"You look pretty happy to me," Sirius said while flashing Harry the all clear sign after checking the Fidelius protected shed.

"Do you even know what David Monroe plans to do with them?" Albus tiredly asked.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I do."

"And what's that?"

Harry glanced at Sirius and shrugged. "Defeat the Dark Lord."

Albus frowned under the realization that researching David Monroe was getting more and more important. "Who is he?"

"You really want to know?" Harry asked with a grin.

Albus recognized that tone of voice. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

Harry's voice was laced with sarcasm. "He very well may be the next Albus Dumbledore."

Albus was watching Harry. "That's not a compliment, is it?"

Harry just smiled innocently.

"Don't look at me like that, Harry. I can make your life very difficult, you know."

Harry just kept smiling.

Albus was getting worried as Sirius was smiling now too. "I'm... sorry?"

Harry was enjoying Albus' insecurity entirely too much.

"He's not going to eat me or assume my life is he? Harry! Why did your eyes widen and our brotherhood charm twitch? Harry, get back here. Harry!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"A '78 Montrachet?" James accepted the two bottles of wine. "And a '61 Petrus? Are you trying to impress me?"

Harry and Sirius shook their heads. "You invited us to dinner. We figured we should bring the wine. Are these bad ones?"

James looked at the exorbitantly valuable bottles. "You have no idea about wine, do you?"

"Not a clue," Harry admitted. "We've got a whole bunch more if you want to come pick something better."

"Something better?" James repeated doubtfully. "Harry, these bottles are worth a small fortune. I can't accept these."

"Forget accepting them," Sirius said. "Let's drink them."

"I'm not surprised they're valuable." Harry leaned closer and whispered, "There's a good chance they came from a magically warded display case in Peter Travers wine cellar."

James blinked as he looked back down at the two bottles in his hands. He squelched his first instinct to take them in as evidence. He glanced over his shoulder before whispering back, "Already?"

Harry nodded.

"Why haven't I heard anything about this?" James wondered.

Sirius asked, "How many robberies have you attributed to the Death Eater Bandits?"

"Eight," James replied.

Sirius smugly added, "And what happened to anyone who reported a robbery?"

Harry happily explained, "Public perception says anyone targeted by the Death Eater Bandits must be a Death Eater. That's probably why less than half of them were even reported."

James couldn't stop the vindictive smile from spreading across his face. He looked back down at the wine in his hands. "I'm going to enjoy drinking these. Come on in, guys."

Harry and Sirius hung their cloaks on the stand by the door, walking into Potter's home as guests for the first time.

"They're here," James shouted loudly.

It sounded like a stampede coming around the corner with Sarah and Lily in the lead. Lily arrived a split second before Sarah, as the two slammed into Harry's body with a double thud. They both were desperately hugging the life out of them.

Harry hadn't even caught his breath before Tonks was embracing him too. He saw Jimmy smiling at his discomfort before he also joined in the smothering group hug.

"See!" Sirius exclaimed. "I told you that cologne was every bit as good as the brand name. Trust the power of the Pad-nose."

Harry sent out an invisible arm and flicked the aforementioned Pad-nose. Harry then used his invisible arms snaking all around the mass surrounding him and patted everyone on the back. "There, there."

"Shut up, Harry," Lily ordered in between sniffles.

"Okay," Harry weakly said, not taking much comfort from the sudden group hug. "But a little reminder: I grew up in a cupboard. Not a big fan of tight enclosed spaces."

The Potter family and Tonks all disentangled themselves and gave Harry room to breathe.

Harry relaxed and smiled at the expressive show of emotion. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful but what can I do to avoid that happening again?"

"Oh Harry," Lily said, fighting back tears as she thought of her time in the pensieve. "The things you... and when you had to... and when she... it was the most heart-breaking thing I've ever-" her words

finally crossed into truly unintelligible gibbering. She lunged forward and hugged Harry again.

Harry resigned himself to holding on to Lily Potter for a little while and shifted her to the side, so he could talk with the others. "Let me guess, the Mirror of Erised?"

Lily let out a small wail and Tonks and Sarah latched onto Harry again.

"Oof-kay," Harry said, slightly more prepared than the first time. He was patting them all on the back with invisible arms. "I feel it's only fair to remind you that I was eleven when my parents and family were what my heart most desired. So we're talking years before I ever learned about the Feast of Satiation and how once every four years an entire colony of Veela goes into a frenzied lust for one very magical weekend."

"That's just a rumor," Sirius insisted, giving Harry a significant look.

Harry smiled at his godfather. "Sure it is," Harry said as he tapped his nose with his forefinger.

Smiling back, Sirius mirrored the gesture, tapping his nose with a silent nod.

Lily was still hugging Harry as she wryly commented, "If only you'd had a mother, you might not have been such a pervert."

"Somehow, I doubt his godfather would have let that happen," James said with a grin. He quickly clarified, "I meant he'd still be a pervert. Not that he'd kill Harry's mother."

Harry scrutinized his godfather. "Let's not be hasty and rule anything out just yet."

"Prison changes a man," Remus added from the side in a faux raspy voice.

Sirius faked a look of emotional pain. "Moony! Making fun of my most painful and private moments?"

Remus growled. "I owe you both for the crap they've been giving me. You promised never to tell anyone about my evil pedo twin."

"But we didn't *tell* anyone," Sirius argued. "I intend to keep honoring that promise. Besides Moony, I'm sure you can imagine some of the things we could have put in there."

Harry was finally released from Lily's grip as he turned to Sirius. "Have you been holding out on me?"

Sirius shook his head. "I was thinking of this world and how I've accidentally walked in on-"

"Nine times is not accidental!" Remus snapped.

Lily sighed and pleaded, "Can we please at least pretend to be responsible adults and not discuss our perversions or homicidal tendencies for one night? Just one."

James laid a comforting hand on his wife's shoulder. "I think we can manage one-"

A loud extremely high-pitched shriek interrupted James.

Sirius winced. "Someone step on your house elf's tail?"

"House elves have tails?" Jimmy asked in confusion.

Sirius frowned. "How else are they supposed to eat?"

"Nappy!" James called out interrupting the surreal byplay.

"Yes'm, Massa," Nappy replied as she appeared. "I din't mean fo' choo t'hear dat. Iza sorry, Massa."

"Are you okay?"

Nappy nodded her head.

"But you screamed."

"Yes'm, Massa. Iza sorry fo' dat."

Lily tried to sound gentle. "Why did you scream?"

Nappy looked embarrassed. "Choo know how Iza like pickin' cotton."

Lily translated for the others. "She's referring to the lint trap in our Magi-wash-n-fluff. Nappy uses it as stuffing in the wonderful pillows and quilts she makes."

"Yes'm, Miss Lily," Nappy agreed. "I makin' a quilt and was pickin' my cotton. Iza just startled and screamed. I din't mean to int'rupt cho' evenin'. Iza jus' gonna put the finger back and not be askin' no questions."

"What?" Lily snapped in surprise.

"What?" Peter Potter said as he and the Headmaster approached the welcoming party.

James was remembering a bit of paperwork he'd put off and forgotten about. "Oh... crap."

"James?"

Sirius just started laughing. "It's Malfoy's, isn't it?"

"What?" Albus snapped in surprise.

"What?" Jimmy asked in confusion.

James looked slightly embarrassed but not all that upset. "With everything going on that day, I guess I just... forgot."

Harry looked way too happy, holding in his giggling. "You forgot you had Malfoy's finger in your pocket?"

James saw the looks his wife was giving him as he shrugged helplessly.

"Hang on!" Sarah shouted. She turned to her little brother. "So when my whites came out pink that really wasn't a prank?"

"I told you I had nothing to do with that," Jimmy insisted.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Sarah said running off to change and burn some of her clothes.

"Sorry honey," James called out to his pale little girl. He saw the looks of horror and amusement on others' faces as he turned to the squat, frowning elf. "And sorry to you to, Nappy."

Nappy waved her hands in the air in distress. "Choo da Massa. I da Nappy. Choo don't hafta apologize to me."

James saw his wife still looked pretty upset. "I know, I know. Always empty the pockets before putting it in the dirty laundry. But it was a big day."

Sirius noticed Lily was still speechless and asked, "If you're not using the finger, do you think-"

"Eww," Harry said swatting his godfather on the arm.

"What?" Sirius argued. "It's a collector's item. There can't be more than nine others like it in the world."

Harry sighed. "Think about where that's been."

"It's probably clean and snuggly soft by now," Jimmy argued.

"It's da size of a baby's arm," Nappy supplied.

Lily was beginning to lose hope that this was going to be the perfect family dinner she'd envisioned for this evening.

"I'm sorry but that finger is going into evidence," James assured Sirius.

Albus cleared his throat. "Would you mind perhaps explaining why you have Malfoy's finger?"

Everyone turned to look at Albus, displeasure on their faces.

Albus sighed. "How many times must I also apologize for my evil pedo twin?"

"That's it!" Lily yelled. "No more evil pedos, no more severed fingers, no more homicidal tendencies or... what was the other one?"

"Perversions," Remus helpfully supplied.

"No more talk of perversions either! I want a pleasant, family dinner. Anybody got a problem with that?" Lily slowly swiveled her head from side to side, daring the others to speak up.

They had all pasted smiles on their face as they nodded at Lily.

Harry leaned closer to her and softly joked, "It's okay to cry, you know."

Lily let out something in between laughter and crying and took the opportunity to hug Harry once again.

"Okay," Harry said accepting the unexpected hug. "I was just trying to be funny. You really shouldn't cry. It makes people uncomfortable."

"Shut up, Harry," Lily said, intentionally hugging him harder. She let go and walked over to her husband. "I think we need wine."

"I'll get the..." James trailed off at the look on Lily's face. "I mean I'll give you the wine and go take care of the... thing."

"Smart man," Lily said grabbing the bottles and leading the rest back towards the dining room.

Albus waited for the others to pass and pounced on Harry. "I was hoping you might shed some light on a few of the mysteries surrounding David Monroe."

Harry waved his godfather on and looked at Albus. "Jumping right into it, eh?"

"The longer I keep you, the more I risk your mother's wrath," Albus explained.

Harry darkly laughed. "Why are you the last one to keep calling her my mother?"

Albus frowned. "What would you prefer I call her?"

"Lily, Mrs. Potter, master, whatever you want," Harry said with a shrug of his shoulders. He saw Albus wanted a better explanation. "Yes, I mean Lily is family, as are all the Potters. And there isn't a good word for our relationship, but you're insulting my real mother every time you call Lily that."

"My apologies," Albus said slightly shamed. "Now please stop stalling with your attempts to get me into trouble with your evil pedo twin mother."

"That'll work," Harry cheered thinking 'evil pedo twin' was a sufficient qualifier for calling this Lily Potter his mother.

Albus was beginning to think he wouldn't be getting any decent answers tonight. "Harry."

"Yeah?"

"David Monroe?"

"Interesting fellow." Harry grinned. "Very interesting."

Albus sighed and whispered conspiratorially, "Will you at least confirm if he is the mysterious wizard in black?"

Harry's voice dropped to a mocking whisper. "Will you at least call him by his proper name?"

"That Fucker," Albus quickly added. "Is David Monroe that fucker?"

"No," Harry said.

Albus blinked. "He's not?"

"No," Harry corrected. "I was answering the first question. No, I won't confirm it."

"Harry," Albus frowned, knowing without a doubt that David Monroe had to be.

“You told me you were blissful in your ignorance,” Harry reminded. “Why would you want to lose all that safe protection of the sand surrounding your head in the ground?”

“Harry,” Albus said, wondering just how many meanings and emotions he’d managed to use with that single name.

“Okay, let me put it this way: you know more than a fair share of my secrets and you know why it’s important that they stay secret.”

Albus nodded.

“David Monroe, as I’m sure you’ve guessed, also has a number of secrets that should stay secret.”

“He’s from a-”

“Don’t even try to guess,” Harry interjected. “Just don’t.”

Albus sighed in frustration, thinking of his distinct lack of options.

“Listen,” Harry said. “You remember how Tonks and Remus trusting me was enough for you at first?”

Albus nodded.

“Same thing,” Harry said sending magic into the brotherhood charm he shared with Albus. “Have a little faith in my judgment.”

“So you trust him?”

Harry chuckled. “About as far as I could throw him.”

Albus sighed.

“Okay, maybe not even that far.”

Albus took a breath and tried to salvage something positive from this discussion. “I understand you don’t trust easily, but you at least believe him to be a good man?”

“No,” Harry blurted out way too quick for Albus’ liking. “A good man? Hell, I don’t even think I’m a ‘good’ man.”

Albus just glared.

“It’s a switch I can flip on occasionally,” Harry admitted. “But David?” Harry saw Albus was desperate. “For what it’s worth, while I might not buy his motivations, I do believe that David is trying to be something of a good man.”

Albus latched onto that as solace and nodded.

“Or rather he’s trying to do good things,” Harry clarified. “We are who we choose to be, right?”

Lily Potter cleared her throat loudly. She was standing in hallway, holding two glasses of wine.

“Sorry about that,” Harry said to Lily as he accepted the offered glass of wine. “It was his fault.”

“I know,” Lily said holding out the other glass for Albus. “Drink your wine, Headmaster.”

Albus double-checked the hidden bezoar he kept in his false tooth and warily took the glass.

Lily glanced over her shoulder as Harry hurried towards the dining room. “Harry sure likes getting you in trouble.”

“He most certainly does,” Albus agreed subtly casting detection spells on the wine. “And you know it only works because you allow his-”

“Don’t,” Lily warned.

Albus wisely stayed quiet and took a sip of the wine.

“I know you’re not the one I’m angry with. But if nothing else perhaps you’ll learn to never place an orphan with people like my sister.”

Albus was quietly mumbling into his glass. “You were the one who gave him the blood protection.”

“What?” she snapped dangerously.

“Nothing,” Albus quickly exclaimed. “Lesson learned. No role in child placement without many, many layers of accountability.”

Lily nodded in agreement.

Albus began to walk with Lily towards the dining room. “Perhaps, Harry’s former Headmaster relied too much on your brilliant advice and counsel in those sorts of matters.”

Lily looked at him curiously. “You know, if you want to distance yourself from Harry’s former Headmaster, I’d advise against rationalizing his actions for him. But the sucking up to me is a nice touch.”

Albus smiled in amusement. “I can see where Harry gets his bluntness from.”

“Don’t push it,” Lily warned, making it clear he wasn’t out of the doghouse yet.

“Check it out,” Jimmy said pointing towards Nappy’s glazed over eyes. “Harry can obliviate house elves.”

“*Obliviate*,” Harry cast yet again on the poor elf. “Stop saying that.”

Lily looked up in surprise. “I didn’t think it was possible to memory charm a house elf.”

Nappy looked up. “Choo can-”

“*Obliviate*,” Harry cast once more. “Stop! Or I’ll start casting them on everyone.”

“It’s cool!” Jimmy defended.

James came in from the back way. “What’d I miss?”

“Harry can-*mmph-mmph*,” Jimmy was cut off as a buttery roll floated up and was crammed into his mouth.

“Nothing,” Harry said. “Just... nothing.” He saw Jimmy was now calmly eating the roll. “Jimmy’s got the right idea. How about we eat?”

The large group settled into the lengthened dinner table and several of the dishes started to get passed around. Sirius leaned over towards James asked, “So you took care of the thing?”

James chanced a brief glance at his wife and told Sirius. “It’s gone. Give it up.”

“But I wanted to-*mmph-mmph*,” Sirius’s whining was cut off by a roll as Harry saw Lily was getting irritated again.

James grabbed a roll of his own and commented. “You like to use those arms, don’t you?”

“They have their uses.” Harry couldn’t help but want to show off. Food from all around the table floated into perfect place onto his plate. “I can be a terror in a food fight.”

Lily shook her head with a smile. “I shudder to think of the-”

She was interrupted by the sudden splat of mashed potatoes smacking Harry in the back of the ear. She saw the guilty party at the other end of the table. “Peter!”

“What?” Peter defended. “He was practically asking for it. Thinking he could take on all of us at once.”

“I never said that,” Harry insisted as some hot gravy was poured down an unprepared Peter’s back.

“No,” Lily shouted. “I will not have this evening descend into-” She stopped suddenly as an olive tweaked her nose.

“Oh... crap,” Jimmy muttered under his breath.

“James Edward Potter, Junior,” Lily said breaking out the full name.

“Dad hit me first!” Jimmy pleaded pointing across the table.

“You’re grounded,” James retorted in lieu of an empty denial.

“I’m still in school.”

Lily had reached her breaking point and drew her wand. She clenched a fist around the tip and slammed it down on the table. The magic reacted instantly and every plate in front of a guest jumped up and flew into their respective faces and laps.

Lily smiled at all the indignant shouts. “I feel much better now.”

Harry looked up from the food covering his front and smirked at Lily. “A worthy opponent I see.”

“I did not do this to-*ohhh...*” Lily trailed off into a shocked gasp as the bottle of wine floating over her head proceeded to pour its entire contents into her hair and down her favorite dress. “It’s on now.”

With a whip of her wand, two still warm pies came arcing in, circling around the group and zeroing in on Harry from two sides.

Two invisibles punches sent steaming peach and blackberry filling splattering into all directions.

Sirius just grabbed the two glasses in front of him and simultaneously threw their contents into the faces of Harry on his right and James on his left.

Albus, not one to miss an opportunity, sent out an animated army of chicken wings marching down the table. The chicken wings were pouring salad dressing into a miniature trebuchet they’d fashioned out of a ladle and a napkin holder.

Sarah and Jimmy were focused on tossing anything they could get their hands on at Harry. Jimmy saw how pointless their efforts were as everything bounced back towards them. He noticed his sister wasn’t paying him any attention and transfigured an ear of corn to look like a swollen rotting finger.

Timing it as a hail storm of peas bounced back at them, Jimmy subtly levitated the finger right in front of his sister’s dress and jammed it into her awaiting cleavage.

Sarah looked down and saw the discolored finger pointing up at her accusingly from between her breasts. She started to shriek. She toppled wildly out of her chair and scrambled back trying to get away. She was pulling on the offending digit but her grip slipped and she cleanly knocked herself out leaving a small dent in the wall where her skull hit.

Everyone paused for a moment to observe the first casualty.

“For wanting to be a healer, that was pretty pathetic,” Jimmy commented.

Tonks admitted from the other side, “In fairness I saw what you were doing, and I might have hit the finger with charms to lock it in place and wiggle constantly.”

The pause in fighting lasted only until another ladle full of dressing splattered onto Harry’s shield.

Albus snapped his wand and the chicken wings all fell lifelessly where they were. “I see cooler heads have-” His declaration was cut off as a giant amorphous jelly monster had appeared behind Albus and fallen forward. The headmaster’s entire upper torso and head were submerged inside the dark green gelatinous blob.

Albus barely opened his eyes and saw the world was tinted green. He closed them in concentration and appeared to vibrate in place. The resulting green jelly explosion coated the walls, ceiling, and everyone else, shields and all in a sticky soppy mess.

“Get him!” Lily shouted with a renewed fervor as a pie knocked the back of Albus’ head forward.

What had started as a chaotic battle quickly turned into a bloodbath, a gravy bath, and an au jus bath. Albus made no offensive maneuvers and hunched down letting everything hit him. He hid his face behind his arms resting on the table.

The good natured food fight offered the Potters an opportunity to vent some of their anger for Dumbledore’s counterpart on the old man himself.

Harry spotted the crafty magic at play and moved over towards the wall where the real Dumbledore was invisibly observing. "Not going to sneak away, are you?"

Dumbledore knew he'd been spotted as he watched the others laying into his hastily transfigured body double. "This is you and your manipulative memories' fault."

"They're just memories," Harry argued with a grin. "A little unvarnished truth from my life experiences."

"Yes and arranged to play in a devastatingly precise order," Albus commented. "The Mirror of Erised at the end was a masterstroke."

"Sirius talked me into that one," Harry agreed. "I thought it felt a little too Dumbledore-ish for me."

Albus sighed at having become an unflattering adjective. He canceled his invisibility spell and attracted the others' attention as he loudly asked, "Are you about done?"

One last conjured pineapple clunked off the illusion's head.

"Sorry," Remus said meekly having been the last one to stop. "Mob mentality and all."

Albus frowned knowing he definitely would have bruised from that pineapple. "And do you feel any better?"

"Yes, much," Lily happily concurred.

"I do," Tonks nodded in slight surprise.

"That was fun," Jimmy agreed. "Especially since Sarah missed most of it."

James was already casting a simple bruise-relieving charm on the back of his daughter's head. He helped to her feet while Albus reversed his double's transfiguration.

Lily was looking at the carnage everywhere, including the green jelly dripping from the ceiling. She grabbed a handful of her own hair and squeezed. A small stream of wine dripped out and into her empty glass. She lifted her glass in salute to Harry and drank it.

“Eurgh, that’s horrible,” Lily announced, wincing from the taste.

“Pretty disgusting from this side too,” James added.

Sarah extricated the ear of corn from her chest and dropped it down her little brother’s back. Jimmy’s hair and front were covered with mashed potatoes. He just shrugged indifferently at the corn pressing into his back.

Sarah picked a couple of kernels from her cleavage and warned her brother, “I’m going to make you rue.”

Jimmy begged. “It wasn’t that big a-”

“Rue!” Sarah shouted.

Remus saw Harry and Sirius looked lost. “Jimmy’s first detention with Snape was to write lines. Three rolls of parchment of *I shall rue the day I ever met Severus Snape*. Since then it’s kind of...”

Sirius couldn’t help himself. “He’s a rued bastard.”

“Oh Merlin,” Harry groaned. “Pardon me, Lily, but...” He paused and used a pair of invisible arms to yank the chair right out from under Sirius.

Sirius’s tailbone hit hard and he yelped in pain.

Lily had finished dabbing her face clean and admitted the obvious. “It appears we didn’t prepare enough food.”

“You know I don’t think it’s the amount as much as it is us,” Harry suggested.

“Is this how most of your dinner parties go?” Lily asked while brushing a deviled egg off her shoulder.

“The good ones,” Harry agreed. “And besides it’s hard to call this a dinner party when we’re all family.” He paused a beat and added, “And Albus.”

Albus cleared his throat and retorted, “I believe you’ll find we’re brothers in magic.”

Lily stood up from her seat. “How does sandwiches and beer sound?” She received nods of approval and continued, “You can take turns cleaning up and meet me back in the kitchen.”

“Sounds perfect,” Peter heartily agreed, knowing his entire left side was still coated in green jelly.

James explained, “There are two showers upstairs and one downstairs. Sirius, there’s a hose out back.”

Harry chuckled and moved to follow Jimmy towards one of the bathrooms.

“Nappy!” Lily called out.

The elf popped into the room and had her mouth open before she took in the current state of cleanliness. Nappy just looked from Lily to James to the walls to everyone else. She was making a little keening sound and appeared to be nearing a breakdown.

“Relax Nappy,” Lily tried to comfort the elf. “We’re going to leave this room, and you can clean it at your leisure. No rush, no pressure. We’re going to help ourselves and stay in the kitchen.”

Nappy was taking quick and frantic breaths, unsuccessfully trying to calm herself. “Can Iza sing, Miss Lily?”

Lily smiled at the kind-hearted creature. “Of course you can, Nappy.”

Nappy looked at Lily pleadingly.

Lily nodded and could tell Nappy was eager to get to work. “Alright, everybody out. Let’s stop bothering poor Nappy.”

Wet squishing sounds accompanied every step as they all filed out of the dining room, away from the tiny creature waving them on.

The doors closed behind them and a deep voice was heard from the edible battlefield. "*Swing low, sweet chariot...*"

Harry took a bite from his roast beef sandwich and elbowed his smiling host. "I know this probably hasn't lived up to your expectations, but I like this more than a formal dinner."

Lily smiled at Harry. "Why is that?"

"The food may not be as fancy, but it's more intimate." Harry took a sip of his beer. "The formality of entertaining guests versus the familiarity of friends and family."

"You know you're welcome here anytime," Lily offered.

Harry nodded in gratitude. "If you don't mind, I'd like to put up a ward or two. Secure it a bit more and let me know if anyone tries to attack here."

"You're pretty good with wards, aren't you?"

Harry shrugged. "I know a bit. One of those side effects of my life."

"Harry," Sirius shouted out in between giggles. "Have you seen today's Quibbler?"

"Oh dear," Lily muttered as she saw all the others were crowded around a copy of the eccentric periodical.

"What is it?" Harry asked warily.

"Another supposed conquest of yours that I dearly hope is polyjuice," Lily said distastefully.

Harry accepted the paper and saw the magically moving photo on page eight. "That's my bedroom," he said as he saw his half naked body sleeping. The covers over his legs shifted and Delores

Umbridge's surprised face came up from between his legs and looked right into the camera, before burrowing back under the covers.

The scene repeated over and over, with Umbridge looking surprised each time.

Harry growled at the unsubtle laughing. "Oh Tonks?"

Tonks was cowering behind her adoptive father as far from Harry as she could. She softly asked, "Yeah?"

Harry grunted at the extra effort in the distance but yanked her to float right in front of him.

"It wasn't me!" She insisted.

Harry looked back down at the small print by the photo. "Photo courtesy of Tonks Poopin?"

"Okay it might have been me."

Harry growled.

"Parley! Truce! Uncle!"

"You're not a pirate and your only uncle is Lucius Malfoy." Harry belatedly added, "Or perhaps your dad."

Jimmy and Sirius both found that addition and Remus' reaction particularly amusing.

"Truce, Harry, truce," Tonks begged. "Can't we all just get along?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "You have more pictures, don't you?"

"Tons," Tonks happily agreed. "There's this one where Snape's hair is tickling your nose and it looks like you're petting him."

"Tonks!"

"Truce!" she insisted back.

Harry saw the eager looks on the others' faces and set her back down. "I'll agree to a temporary cessation of hostilities while I figure out suitable terms for a truce."

"Done," Tonks agreed. "But I'm not doing a midget detention."

"No, no midget detention," Harry agreed. "You need something special."

Lily saw Harry's devious smile. "There's a lot I don't know about you."

Harry chuckled and looked up in surprise to see his owl at the window. "Kid Killer McGee? You got something for me?"

The owl hooted as the window opened and flew over to land on the counter in front of Harry. He stuck out his leg and waited until Harry untied the letter before pouncing on the roast beef sandwich in Harry's hand.

"Were you expecting a letter?" Albus asked as he watched Harry casting diagnostic charms on the sealed parchment.

Harry looked at Albus and shrugged. "I don't know that many people beyond those in the room."

Harry detected some unknown magic in the parchment but it wasn't on the whole paper just a small spot. He unrolled the letter and discovered a string sprouted near the bottom left corner sticking out a couple of inches from a small magical seal.

"There's a string coming out of the parchment," Harry said seeing if anyone else recognized the spell.

Sirius could tell Harry wanted a response. "If it's anything like a passed out drunken hag, trust me, you don't want to pull on that string."

"Oh god, I'd forgotten about that," James cringed remembering a trip down Knockturn Alley the summer after his first year.

Harry did his best not to think about that and read the letter silently to himself.

Harry,

I suspect you'll have more use for this than I will. It never liked me much but as you know well, it makes a powerful tool to use against its brother. Nevertheless, I am now in possession of an excellent yew wand that likes me far more than this one ever did. I suppose it's also worth noting that my yew wand's previous owner is secure in his cage. Brothers in magic and brothers in wands, eh?

We'll be in touch.

-David

Harry blinked as he took in the meaning of the letter. He looked up and saw no one else could see the contents before inspecting the string excitedly. He grabbed onto it and carefully tugged. The small circle around where the string connected lit up in a white hot fire and a holly wand was erupting out from the surface as he pulled the string up.

"I have got to learn this spell," Harry commented highly impressed at the magic involved. Just as the full eleven inches were out the seal on the parchment and the string disappeared. The wand began to fall.

Seeker reflexes kicking in, Harry snatched it out of the air. "Ohhh," Harry groaned in release as the comfort of his first wand reacted to his magic. His eyes were shut in contented bliss. A geyser of red, white, and gold sparks streamed from the tip. It lasted several seconds before slowing to a trickle. "Oh-oh," Harry grunted again as another couple of spurts shot out the tip.

"That was disgusting," Sarah summarized for all those watching.

"Ahh," Harry said one last time as two more dribbles of magic oozed out the tip of his wand. "That's the stuff."

Albus suddenly put two and two together. "He obliviated Ollivander."

Harry didn't feel like implicating the man just yet and flashed a smirk at his godfather. Harry turned to Albus with a determined expression. "I think it's time I joined the Order."

"Really?" Albus said in surprise. "You were waiting on the wand?"

"Sure," Harry shrugged indicating that had nothing to do with it. "But only until Voldemort is defeated."

Albus blinked. "Of course. The Order will be disbanded after the Dark Lord is gone."

"So..." Harry trailed off. "Don't I get a merit badge or something?"

Albus frowned. "I'll introduce you at the next meeting but it's nothing so formal. The only identifiable characteristic is one of these." Albus floated his personal chocolate frog card into Harry's hand.

Harry thought the holographic picture of Albus had jammed his beard in his ear, but it moved too fast for him to be sure.

"Potter! Are you there?" A shout came from the fireplace in the other room.

"Kingsley?" James asked hurrying into the next room and spotting the bald auror's head in his floo.

"The Dark Lord is dead! Get to the Ministry. I've got to track down Albus next." Kingsley's head disappeared before James could say another word.

"The what is what?" James repeated in disbelief.

"The what?" Albus shouted from the kitchen.

"I believe he said the Dark Lord is dead," Harry said with a grin while still inspecting the chocolate frog card. "And may I say, it's been a pleasure being a part of the Order, but I'm glad that chapter of my life is over now."

Albus was too flustered at first to properly respond.

James hurriedly kissed his wife on the cheek and promised to be in touch. He apparated straight to the Ministry.

Albus looked at Harry standing there calmly. "Harry? Is this..."

Harry nodded with certainty as the chocolate frog card in his hand flared to life.

"Headmaster, err, Lord Black?" Kingsley Shacklebolt corrected himself in obvious confusion.

"Relax, Kingsley, I'm part of the Order," Harry assured him with a smile.

"Right," Kingsley warily agreed. "Where's Albus?"

"I shall summon him immediately," Harry pompously replied as the chocolate frog card was wrenched from his hand.

"Give me that!" Albus loudly pouted. "I'm here."

"The Dark Lord is dead! Voldemort was going after the Minister's daughter but David Monroe protected her and killed him with a lucky shot! Mad-eye's testing what's left of the body now." Kingsley's head turned to the side. "I've gotta go. There's a secure floo to the site connected from DMLE headquarters."

Albus just nodded at the chocolate frog card as it deactivated. He looked over to Harry expectantly.

Harry was content to act nonchalant. "So do Order members get like a pension or something?"

Albus sighed and apparated away.

Harry glanced around the room before turning to Sirius with a glint in his eyes. "You know, Padfoot..."

"I like that look in your eye," Sirius exclaimed, grinning excitedly.

Harry was smiling while the others were still struggling with the shock of the Dark Lord's sudden defeat. "I was just thinking this calls for a celebration."

"Yeah?" Sirius asked hopefully.

Harry nodded. "We should throw the party to end all parties."

"Who were you thinking on inviting?"

"Well," Harry admitted and scratched his head. "I was thinking we should invite... everyone."

"Everyone?"

"Everyone."

"Grimmauld Place?"

"Say about two to three hours to set everything up and let the good news spread?"

"I bet we could get Gin to close her doors and sell us her current inventory."

"The twins could probably help put together a light show or two."

Sirius was smiling so brightly his face looked like it would split. "I remember how things were the first time when I was hunting Wormtail. Ministry Obliviators are going to *hate* us."

"That's why they're invited too," Harry grinned.

Sirius was running through ideas in his head. He jumped up and jerked his head. "Well come on. We've got work to do."

Harry turned towards the still stupefied Lily Potter. He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you for a lovely dinner. But it looks to be a long night."

Harry and Sirius happily marched out of the room, off to hastily arrange the party of the century.

Lily, Remus, Tonks, Peter, Jimmy, and Sarah were all still standing around slowly comprehending the magnitude of the news.

“Voldemort is... dead.” Lily tried out the words.

Jimmy nodded and voiced the only question on his mind. “What do you wear to a ‘dark lord defeated’ party?”

Harry and Sirius didn’t have enough time for all of their grand plans, but they did create a giant circular dungeon room with no visible doors or windows that served as the primary dance floor, hire a DJ, enchant several trampolines illegally, steal all of Hogwarts school brooms, hide the second and third floors of the manor, ward the entire property from muggle notice, magic a massive hole through to the roof, and conjure a few hundred masks for anyone who wanted them.

The masks were of Voldemort’s face locked in a look of surprise with “I’m so dead!” branded across his forehead.

The immense circular room was Sirius’ project. It was big enough to fit the Burrow stacked twice within the room. All the walls were charmed to show memories controlled by the throne like stage where the DJ worked. Also at the DJ’s control was a button that would mimic an earthquake on the dance floor. If the button was held down, eventually the whole room would start to spin in place.

One trampoline was charmed to catch people jumping down into the room, while another bounced them the seventy feet up to the enlarged foyer where the only door in and out of Grimmauld Place was. Half a dozen more trampolines were around the floor and pre-charmed with several easily modifiable settings. Brooms were scattered all around the place for those uncomfortable with the trampolines.

On the other side of the stage was the pudding pit for wrestling.

Howlers were sent off to all the major magical alleys, Hogsmeade, Hogwarts, St. Mungo’s, and even the Ministry. They all said the same

thing. *“Voldemort is dead! If you feel this nugget of knowledge is worth celebrating then come party with the Lords Black at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. Leave your conscience at the door. Clothing optional.”*

Tonks urged her platinum blonde hair to grow longer and cover her ridiculously sized bare breasts. She took a few more tentative steps adjusting to the feel of hooves. “Are you sure five minutes isn’t enough?”

“Ten,” Harry said nodding in approval of the partial transfiguration. Tonks had to take a Norton’s Brew to get it to stick, but her bottom half had been replaced with the body of a horse. When you added in her nude upper half, she made for a hot centaur. “Ten minutes from the moment we appear, and you can’t just stand there. You have to engage in conversations with people.”

Tonks was pulling her hair flatter, trying to keep her nipples from poking out. She looked at the bright smile on Harry’s face. “I’m beginning to think a midget detention doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Just ten minutes,” Harry reminded her. “And then we’ve got a truce. I shall pursue no further vengeance for this morning’s Quibbler. But if any new pictures surface, all bets are off.”

Tonks gave up playing with her hair and tried to swish her tail. She only managed to wiggle her bottom. “You’re not forcing me to return all the other pictures and destroy the negatives?”

Harry gave her an experimental squeeze and looked up at her indignant frown. “Where would be the fun in that?”

Tonks slapped Harry’s hand away when he went for another squeeze. “Let’s get this over with.”

Harry tapped a disillusionment charm over his head and grabbed Tonks’ arm. “I’ll help you to the dance floor.”

Harry rested a hand on Tonks’ back where it met the horse transfiguration and guided her from the backyard to the foyer.

Dozens of people were standing around the railing circling the twenty foot in diameter hole in the foyer. They were chattering wildly, breaking into excited hugs and exclamations of joy, and passing bottles of unknown alcohol around merrily. But not a single person missed the fact that a large and healthy female centaur just walked out from the kitchen.

Males and females alike were struggling to meet Tonks' eyes. She just nodded silently at them while Harry was sniggering into his disillusioned hand.

"I got you," Harry assured Tonks as she gracelessly hopped over the railing and down the hole to the dance floor.

The receiving trampoline caught them smoothly and their fall slowed to a gentle stop. Tonks took a few shaky steps and walked off the trampoline with the help of a disillusioned Harry.

"Nine more minutes," Harry muttered out the corner of his mouth as he gave Tonks a gentle smack on her hindquarters and walked away.

"Wow," one man exclaimed shortly before getting cuffed in the head by his wife.

"Greetings," Tonks said walking up to the unknown man. "I am Sugarbane. Tell me, do you know where I could find Lord Harry Black?"

Several scantily clad women had all surrounded her and asked, "What're you looking for him for?"

Tonks had to smother a smile at the slutty Lord-diggers' jealousy. She arched her back proudly and thrust her chest out. "Stories of his legend have spread far across the lands. And I tire of the pathetically small horse cocks among the males in my clan."

A disillusioned man fell to the floor in an effort not to laugh out loud.

Tonks nodded at the incredulous faces. "Fridwulfa the Giantess tells of the prowess-

“Tonks?” Jimmy exclaimed having recognized her mannerisms, even if he’d never seen this face before.

Tonks took four slow and wobbly steps towards Jimmy, and when she was finally close enough, she slapped him across the face. “Hold your tongue, youngling.”

Jimmy put his hand against his sore cheek but couldn’t tear his eyes away from the sight.

“Eyes up,” Tonks snapped.

“Sorry,” Jimmy said looking Tonks in the eye. He stole a quick glance to make sure the breasts were still there but held eye contact for the most part.

Tonks sighed and asked, “Do you know where I could find Lord Harry Black?”

“Huh?” Jimmy asked with a wandering eye.

“Eyes up!”

Jimmy jerked his head up. “Lord Harry Black?”

“Yes,” Tonks eagerly asserted.

Jimmy looked over to the right and then the left. “There he is. That’s him.”

Tonks had her arms out to the side to steady herself as she half-galloped towards the extremely amused Harry and Sirius.

The effect of her brisk movement was not lost on any of the men there.

“Lord Harry Black,” Tonks said with a slight bow. “The stars speak of a glorious joining.”

Harry was holding his chin in thought. “Can you gallop again?”

Tonks restrained herself from trying out a donkey kick. Instead she hopped in place a couple times, making sure her swollen mammary continued gyrating in small aftershocks. She stoically deadpanned, "The heavens have foretold my coming."

Harry knew he was going to crack up if he let Tonks keep talking. He smiled at Sirius. "Why not?"

Harry took two steps and used his magical arms to hop into place on Tonks' back like she was a normal steed. He twirled his wand towards the wall and a curtained doorway appeared. "Giddyup!"

Harry used his magical arms to steady and urge Tonks forward leaving a stunned packed dance floor behind.

As soon as they were past the curtain, Harry fell off Tonks back and let out the laughter he'd been holding in.

Tonks stopped and steadied herself in place. "That wasn't ten minutes."

"I don't care," Harry assured her through his mirth. "That was perfect. Full credit. Oh Tonks... did you see the looks on their faces?"

"You mind giving me my legs back?" Tonks said waving her hands towards her equestrian half. "Jimmy needs a little payback too."

"He's a teen," Harry argued. "And those were bouncing. Why did you have to bring Hagrid's mum into this?"

Tonks shrugged as she kneeled down and rolled onto her side. "You know any others giants that've boinked humans?"

"True, but she died a long time ago... I think." Harry carefully reversed the transfiguration, leaving a completely naked Tonks lying on the floor.

"I doubt anyone fooled by that is going to be up to date on giant current events." Tonks stretched and morphed her body into a more comfortable form as she readjusted to being bipedal. She ignored the

pile of clothes Harry set out and stalked over towards him. "Now it's your fault I'm feeling all randy, so you have to fix this one."

Harry didn't fight back as Tonks pushed him down and stood imposingly over him. "Really?"

A predatory smile and a swish of Tonks' wand were the only warning Harry received.

Ten ridiculously frenzied minutes later, the top half of Harry's naked sweaty body stuck out from the curtains and found a crowd of people waiting. "Anyone got a cigarette?"

A loud whinnying sound of relief could be heard in the background.

"Thanks," Harry said accepting a silent offer of a cigarette from a man. He smiled extra brightly at the resigned but amused look on Lily Potter's face as he disappeared back behind the curtain.

Eight minutes and one shared cigarette later, Harry emerged from the curtain providing the cover for a hidden and disillusioned Tonks to sneak out right behind him. Harry waved his wand and the curtained doorway disappeared from view.

"Where's Sugarbane?" the primarily young and male waiting crowd asked.

Harry spotted a brightly smiling and clearly drunk Ron Weasley nodding eagerly to the question. "She, uh," Harry quickly lied, "she said she's going to need to sleep for a few days so... yeah."

Lily approached Harry trying to look disapproving as she handed him a clear glass. "Some whiskey. To wash the sin from your mouth."

Harry smiled at Lily, inspecting the glass. "We're going to need more whiskey."

"Yes," Lily agreed. "We're probably going to need to soak your-"

"Mum!" Jimmy shouted.

“Sorry,” Lily apologized, thinking she might need to lay off the whiskey.

Up on stage by the DJ, Sirius cast a Sonorus charm, and shouted, “Welcome!”

Conversations stopped and turned to the host.

“The Dark Lord is dead, the Dark Lord is dead,” Sirius sang with a little dance.

Everyone cheered and thrust their hands into the air.

“For those that don’t know, I am Sirius Black, one of the Lords of this Noble and Most Ancient House or some such rubbish,” Sirius preened under the cheers and praise for him. “First off, let’s give a big hand to Gin Weasley and the Hog’s Head for the drinks.”

Gin waved as a spotlight flashed her way.

“And of course her illustrious brothers and the fine folks at Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes have provided a number of fireworks.” Sirius shouted pointing a spotlight towards Fred and George.

The twins responded by triggering a pair of magical rockets. The first one reached the main level and exploded, sending a large shower of harmless white sparks all over the foyer and cascading down to the dance floor. The second one spiraled up through the hole out the roof and blew a deafening bang as massive WWW logo hovered in the sky for ten seconds.

Several Ministry workers palmed their faces and went off to make up a story for the muggles.

“And providing the music,” Sirius said pointing towards the man with a fashion sense only Albus Dumbledore would appreciate, “DJ Drastic Squibtastic!”

The quiet music exploded into a frenetic beat and the man pressed the button a couple times to get the room shaking.

“Now I can understand no one breaking in the pudding pit yet,” Sirius continued working the crowd as the music quieted. “We still need to get Tonks a little drunker, but we’re getting there.”

“Oi!” The pink-haired auror shouted down from the railing in the foyer.

Sirius just waved at her as people laughed. “But I’m disappointed no one’s using the trampolines. Maybe you need a demonstration. Harry, show them how it’s done.”

Sirius continued to narrate while Harry grudgingly walked over to one of the six blue trimmed trampolines. “For those of you sober enough to understand, that big hole up there is charmed so that anyone falling through it lands safely on the receiving trampoline. It won’t catch you if you’re on a broom, and it won’t catch you if you’re bonded to a *different* trampoline.”

Harry bounced softly in place until a flash of light appeared.

“Now Harry’s tied to that trampoline,” Sirius explained. “Just sit there until it syncs with you, and then it responds to your wishes.”

Harry had started bouncing ten and fifteen off the ground.

“Don’t be a pansy,” Sirius chided Harry.

On his next bounce down into the trampoline he sank just a little further and longer in before he was launched like a missile, straight up through the foyer, the warded second and third floors, and out the hole in the roof up into the night sky.

Harry’s less than manly scream of glee came zooming back down into the hole and landed right back on the trampoline again. He shouted, “Overdid it a little,” and shot back up into the sky.

The crowds were all looking up waiting for Harry to come back down, but he never did.

“What my camera shy fellow Lord Black has done is to sever his connection with the trampoline,” Sirius explained. “He’s probably setting up the barbecue on the roof right now.”

Sirius turned his head watching the hole in the ceiling while a couple people on brooms flew up to check only to zip out of the way of Harry as he fell. He landed smoothly on the receiving trampoline and nodded at Sirius.

"Fire pits are lit and the night sky up there is beautiful," Sirius urged them all and nodded at the DJ to start up the music again.

Harry apparated with a soft pop and launched the slippery projectile at his godfather.

Sirius felt the splash on his back and sighed. "Oh yeah. And in addition to all the fireworks on the roof, a few of the five hundred water balloons up there are filled with clothes-dissolving potion."

Sirius ran through the crowd as his upper body and lower legs were already bare. He immediately synced with a trampoline and jumped out of view just as the last of his underwear disappeared.

His still amplified voice called down, "Fair warning to anyone thinking of crashing here. If the sun is up and you're still passed out or lying around, we're going to toss you into the floo with no destination. Now turn that music back up!"

The music started pumping loudly and the cheering even drowned that out as the party resumed. Lots were dancing, some using the brooms to get to the roof. Several people used the trampolines to just bounce and make poses for those surrounding the railing in the foyer. There was no argument with giving the ladies first dibs on the trampolines.

Much alcohol was consumed and merriment had.

Inevitably, twenty brooms, some with individuals, some with couples, were all positioned for the first annual naked broom race to Big Ben and back.

All the competitors were wearing "I'm so dead!" Voldemort masks to hide their faces. The masks looked especially amusing on the dozen or so mighty fine looking naked female bodies.

Harry had magically attached the mask to his face after his clothes dissolved for the third time. He looked to his left and saw a pale nubile woman's body that was clearly affected by the breeze. He looked to his right and saw a pair of identical naked female bodies on a single broom and came to a conclusion.

"This isn't going to work," Harry muttered pulling the broom out from under him and spinning to face the other way. He remounted his broom with the bristles in front of him.

"Three, two, one, GO!" The mask wearing referee shouted.

Harry zoomed off the roof, getting way ahead of the pack, despite flying backwards and facing the wrong way. He was watching all the naked women gripping their broom handles tighter. "Sweet."

Harry had to reach behind him and jerk the handle of the broom as he was flying a little too close to a large Victorian house. "Whoa."

"Ha-ha!" a particularly competitive woman shouted as the pack flew over the stumbling backwards facing wizard. "Not so cocky now, are you?"

"Well you can't beat the view," Harry grinned looking straight up at them. "And it's not like these brooms protect from shrinkage."

Harry kept flying underneath them with his eyes aimed skyward while maintaining the pack's pace. "Sweet."

A scream erupted as a few of the racers got too close and one of the two identical naked bodies fell off her broom.

"Shit," Harry said as he jumped off his broom, spun it around to face the right way and dove after her. He caught her arm just before she crashed into the street below. "Hang on," Harry said as a bus was headed straight for them. He zipped back up into the air and swung the scared woman up over his head and landed her right in place onto the back of his broom behind him.

She was still out of breath as she clutched her arms around Harry holding him tight.

“You okay?” Harry asked as her race partner came flying over.

“Oh my god! I’m so sorry!” the likely twin sister shouted.

“I’m okay,” she assured, scooting closer to Harry. “I’m okay.”

“You saved her,” she said looking at Harry gratefully.

“It happens,” Harry ruefully admitted. “You two want to catch up and win this race?”

“No,” the soft voice over his shoulder said, resting her cheek on Harry’s back. “Take me back, please.”

Harry realized his passenger wasn’t going to get back on the other broom and agreed. “Alright but we’re going to have to have some fun on the flight back then. Hold on.” Harry felt the woman’s breasts press up against his back as she gripped him tighter and he dove down to street level, pulling up just before hitting the pavement.

The fearful shriek of glee was like music to his ears, despite being shouted at point blank range. He saw the other woman was hunched over and keeping up with them as he happily swerved in between cars, stop lights, and trees the whole way.

“Oh,” Harry eeped. “That’s... not the broomstick.”

“Are you sure,” came the breathy answer in his ear. “It feels like it.”

“Umm,” Harry considered the question.

“Besides,” she whispered, licking his ear. “My sister and I must thank you for saving my life.”

Harry gulped and decided to take a slightly longer way home, streaming up into the sky hoping the thinner, colder air would settle him down.

“Slow down,” the cry came from the other broom rider.

Harry had leveled off as the other girl caught right up to them and hovered just a little higher.

She suddenly leapt from her broom and landed right in front of Harry who had to pull his arms back.

"I can't let you have all the fun," the new girl in front said while holding the other broom in one hand grinding her backside towards Harry.

He was struggling but managed to steady the broom wrapped safely in a naked twin Voldemort mask wearing sandwich.

"I don't think this broom was meant for three," Harry said suddenly finding the night air far less cold.

The one in front was holding Harry's arm against her side as she leaned back and whispered in his unoccupied right ear. "Then you should probably take us somewhere, Lord Black."

Harry found himself agreeing heartily. "Recognized me, huh?"

"You have a habit of getting your picture taken shirtless," the answer came from the girl in back nibbling his left ear.

Harry spotted the fire from the pit barbecue in the distance and flew back towards the party. "It's nice to know you've been studying my pictures, Padma."

Both Patil sisters seemed to stiffen and Harry was reassured that he still had some control over the situation.

The awaiting crowds cheered them loudly as the broom carrying three naked people and an extra broom arrived back at the roof.

"There's no way you made it there and back already," the masked referee argued.

"You're right," Harry said as both women hugged him tighter. "I lost the broom race, but well... I win."

"To winning," a clearly inebriated man toasted and everyone around clinked glasses and cheered another reason to take a drink.

Harry flew down the hole, making sure everything was going okay and circled over the heads of the people still dancing.

The naked twins sandwiching him were blushing and holding on while he lazily flew around.

"What are you doing?" Parvati asked from in front, feeling all the eyes on her.

"I could say I'm just making sure the party's going okay," Harry earnestly answered, spotting several aurors and sober responsible adults manning the door, the bathroom lines, and generally keeping an eye on things. "But honestly? Victory lap."

Both Patil sisters ducked their heads to hide their smiles.

Harry spotted Sirius wearing a Voldemort mask and an engorged copy of the troll leg umbrella stand. He poked him in the shoulder inquisitively. "You doing okay?"

Sirius knew only person who'd poke him with an invisible arm while sandwiched between hot naked twins. "Not as good as you are, but yeah."

Harry suddenly felt the identification wards trigger and one of the presences he wasn't expecting arrived. "Did you catch it?"

Sirius nodded. "Bring him on down here."

Harry was squeezed tightly as he flew back up and around the people bouncing on the trampolines. He whispered to both of his passengers. "Don't think I can't tell how much you like people looking at you while hidden under your masks."

Both Patils were giggling softly and holding on.

Harry flew right to the front door and stopped before a non-descript man. "Are you going to wear that glamour all night?"

"I suppose not," the man known as David Monroe agreed, dropping the simple charm and revealing the face his enchanted necklace displayed.

Most people didn't react any, but there were a couple of shocked gasps. Harry could tell neither Padma nor Parvati had recognized him and he whispered to Parvati. "Give him the broom."

Tom took the broom and followed Harry down the dance floor. Tom whistled softly in appreciation for the magic of the room. "Sirius' work, I'm guessing?"

"You can identify our styles now?" Harry chuckled as a few others were whispering and pointing to the fully clothed unmasked man landing on the stage.

Sirius had gotten back up on the stage wearing the troll leg like a barrel. He pulled his mask up showing his face and cast *Sonorus* on his throat. "Excuse me! Excuse me!" he shouted as the music quieted.

"We have a very special guest tonight," Sirius yelled as his voice carried throughout the foyer and up to the roof. "Ladies, gentlemen, perverts, deviants, miscreants, and scoundrels," Sirius said walking over and thrusting his arm around Tom's amused shoulders. "For those of you who don't know, I'd like you all to meet David Monroe, the Vanquisher of Voldemort."

Cheers and shouts erupted from everywhere and thunderous applause shook the foundation of every house on the street. People from the roof were flying down as others jumped the railing and landed on the receiving trampoline to get a better look at their surprising savior.

Tom just smiled modestly and waved his thanks while they all kept clapping and shouting his name.

"Did you need anything tonight?" Harry asked Tom who was beginning to blush under all the praise.

Tom shook his head. "Everyone's calling this the party of the century so I thought I'd see what sort of shindig you two were throwing. You

know the DMLE is scared of what would happen if they tried to shut this down.” He leaned over towards Harry and Sirius. “Alan’s still being interrogated, but he may stop by later.”

“Well then,” Harry said, amazed that the people were still cheering and applauding. “If you gentlemen will excuse me, I have better things to do and many positions to do them in.” He waggled his eyebrows and flew back up towards the protected floors, disappearing still happily held in a naked twin sandwich.

Sirius thrust a twenty galleon bottle of brandy into Tom’s hand. “You know, I’m guessing here, but I bet defeating the Dark Lord could get you laid. Just maybe.”

Tom opened the bottle and took a sniff. He glanced over at Sirius. “Have you been drinking?”

“A little,” Sirius admitted while snapping the straps holding his troll leg suit up. “Ooh! A Potter.”

Tom just watched in amusement as Sirius ran over towards Jimmy, who had passed out headfirst on the makeshift bar Gin was working at.

“Jimmy?” Sirius asked pulling the young man’s head up by the hair.

“Uhh,” the exhausted Head Boy groaned.

Sirius let his head drop back into his folded arms on the bar and smiled at Gin. “Hey Gin? You wanna do me a favor?”

“What’s that?” she asked, sipping on her own beer.

“Jimmy’s got a guest room on the third floor,” Sirius explained as he slapped a sticker onto her arm. “Don’t take that off, or it’ll vanish. But now you should be able to see the second and third floors. You mind helping him up to his room?”

Gin looked at the stream of drool connecting Jimmy’s open mouth and a small puddle on the bar and found it pathetically cute. “Sure.”

She agreed moving over and slinging one of his limp arms across her back.

“Oh and when you get him to bed, make sure that he drinks this potion before he falls asleep for the night.”

“Got it.” Gin accepted the clear vial and helped Jimmy over towards the trampoline that took people up.

“Padfoot?” Remus said as he walked up behind him. “You’re not trying to play matchmaker again, are you?”

“Who? Me?” Sirius replied a little too innocently.

“What was in that potion?” Remus warily asked.

“Same thing Fred and George tricked me into drinking earlier,” Sirius admitted while looking down his troll leg suit. He looked back at Remus. “New one they’re working on called Pecker-Up. It’s basically a Pepper-Up but it also makes the drinker’s-”

“I got it,” Remus interrupted with a frown. “So when Jimmy... oh.”

“Yup.”

“And you think she’ll...”

“Enh... maybe.”

Remus sighed. “You’re like the tallest and sickest cupid ever.”

“Worked with you,” Sirius argued. “Speaking of, where is your worse half? Did she even make it?”

Remus shook his head. “Didn’t you notice the winner of the naked broom race was slightly pregnant?”

“Really?”

Remus nodded. “She painted over the Black Family crest on her arm. And since the food is on the roof...”

"Ahh," Sirius said in understanding. "Say no more."

The two idly chatted watching all the people dancing and cheering, flying all around them. Occasionally people would come over for drinks and Sirius would happily help the naked ones first. After twenty minutes and no sign of Gin, Sirius decided he'd waited long enough. "Well, I guess this cupid hit another money shot."

"So it appears," Remus agreed, sipping on his beer.

"You wanna do me a favor?"

"Not when you ask like that," Remus said shaking his head.

"No, no," Sirius argued. "Nothing like that. I just don't think Gin's coming back any time soon and wanted you to watch the bar, maybe help mix a few drinks."

Remus nodded. "That I can handle."

"Excellent," Sirius exclaimed. "Because this erection is really starting to itch."

"That was more than I ever wanted to know," Remus said waving Sirius away.

Sirius turned towards the still full crowd and just yelled this time, without any help from a charm. "Excuse me? Sorry, but I seem to have been cursed with a magical erection. Would anyone care to help me with that?"

Several hands went up in the air. Remus felt pity on the world where that pick-up line works.

"Excellent," Sirius agreed at more than two dozen arms in the air. "Okay fellas? Sorry I'm not that drunk and you shouldn't believe what you read in the papers. Now why don't I start with you," Sirius said grabbing the arm of a masked naked woman. "The rest of you can wait in line or draw straws."

"Or they can watch," the unknown woman suggested.

Sirius turned to look at the woman whom he still hadn't seen the face of or even knew the name of. "I love you."

Sirius waved to all the other women with their arms in the air. "The rest of you follow me if you want."

Not all of them did, but Sirius figured eight was enough.

Harry woke up to the feeling of two warm bodies pressed up against him. Padma was nestled snugly under his arm, while Parvati's head was resting on his chest.

"Sweet," Harry mumbled happily.

A loud knock was heard on his bedroom door disturbing the twins' sleep.

"What?" Harry shouted in irritation.

"Hey Harry?" Sirius' voice came from the other side of the door. "Can I come in? I've got..." There was a brief muffled conversation before Sirius continued, "Kelly with me."

Harry pulled the covers up so that only their heads were showing. "It's open."

Sirius walked into the room, having already showered and cleaned. He looked at the twin women under Harry's arms curiously. He waved between Kelly and the twins, "Okay, so how do you three know each other?"

The three women were all shaking their heads.

"I don't think I've ever met them," Kelly explained. "I told you, I'm from the states, and I'm just here visiting my cousin."

"Who's your cousin?" Sirius asked.

"Scott Martin," she answered. "He's a squib from California based in the London headquarters of UPPS."

Parvati was sitting up and holding the sheet to cover herself. "Never heard of him."

Harry sighed. "Sirius, it's not going to happen every time."

"Hah!" Sirius scoffed. "So far this morning I've ended three feuds that have all been going on for centuries and reunited an orphan with the aunt that wasn't allowed custody. Now Kelly is all that's left. So come on, no one's got a missing relative? Or mystery that's befuddled them for years?"

Padma and Parvati were looking to Harry for help but he just shook his head.

"Sorry," Kelly shrugged. "I'm just a girl on vacation who can appreciate a good party when she sees it."

Sirius was getting desperate. "No ancient family feuds or rare artifact you have to find? No Gatekeepers or Keymasters?"

Kelly shook her head. "Muggleborn."

Padma shrugged. "Not unless you know someone with Bombay blood."

Kelly gasped. "I have Bombay blood!"

Parvati jerked up suddenly. "And you're magical."

Kelly nodded. "Graduated from Salem. What did you need?"

Padma was beginning to feel hope again. "Our mother has been slowly dying for years. She needs a kidney transplant-"

"I was born with three kidneys!" Kelly exclaimed in surprise. "This is unbelievable."

Sirius was smiling brightly at Harry as the naked twins jumped over to talk more with Kelly. "Say it."

Harry shook his head.

"Come on. I earned it."

Harry sighed as he watched Padma and Parvati getting dressed paying no attention to him or Sirius at all. "You were right. I shouldn't have doubted you."

Sirius closed his eyes and basked in the admission. "Oh it feels good. It feels very good."

Harry yawned as he slipped on a pair of pajama bottoms and a robe. He saw the three women leave the room without even saying goodbye and felt blessed. He noticed Sirius was really furiously rubbing the front of his pants.

"The morning itches, eh?"

Sirius was still scratching. "The what?"

"You know," Harry assured him while scratching himself too. "The usual morning itches. The ones you're supposed to get."

"Harry," Sirius said looking down the front of his pants. "It's not supposed to be itchy."

Harry slowed down his scratching. "It isn't?"

Sirius sighed thinking they'd both be needing a visit with a healer. "No."

Harry closed his eyes in frustration at his naivety. "There's no such thing as sexual goose bumps, is there?"

"Oh Harry!" Sirius had to laugh.

"I thought it was a Veela thing."

Sirius was still snickering. "I hate to break it to you, but I doubt she was a Veela."

"I'm beginning to think the same thing," Harry admitted. He paused for a moment before going right back to his scratching. "Bugger."

“With every great gift comes a curse,” Sirius ominously explained.

Harry knew he should stop scratching and managed to convince himself rubbing didn’t count as scratching. “So is there a counter-curse?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Sirius replied, deep in thought. “But there are some good ointments.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

“Shiny?” Tom repeated. “I show you one of the most complicated prisons ever created and your first impression is shiny?”

“Well, it is,” Harry argued. “I just hope the bindings holding him in place are as good as the polishing charms.”

“He’s not going anywhere,” Tom said with confidence.

“So was it a conscious choice to pass on concrete, steel bars, and the usual jailhouse classics in favor of the aquarium meets lava lamp art nouveau style?”

Tom looked at his creation with a frown. “It’s a prison for the unbound spirit not a physical manifestation.”

“I’m not contending the purpose,” Harry agreed. “I’m just saying it looks like someone engorged an ugly vase your mother-in-law gave you. The kind of thing you have no choice but to keep on the mantle in case she drops by unexpectedly.”

Tom walked around the grandfather clock sized contraption. The top foot was a cylindrical copper seal trimmed in brass. It capped a two foot stretch of transparent material and sat on a copper base so that the aquarium aspects were at eye level. On two opposite sides ran a series of brass latches and locks. “I didn’t consider aesthetics much when designing it, but you know if you really wanted we could-”

“No,” Harry chided. “We’re not putting Voldemort on display anywhere. As amusing as it might be, I try not to tempt fate if I can help it.”

Harry cast a charm over his eyes and was examining the spell work he recognized in the prison. A fingernail sized black knob inside a small brown bubble from within the opaque green tube was swirling with a sickly grey magic. “So what happened to the trap you told me about?”

Tom could tell Harry was trying to figure out the prison and answered, “Voldemort was feeling vulnerable after the loss of more than half his Death Eaters in only two days, nice job on that by the way. He

needed some leverage and planned to kidnap among others, the Minister's daughter, a young woman who just happens to be a patient of mine."

"A patient of yours?" Harry repeated. "How'd you manage to get the Minister's daughter as a patient?"

Tom smirked in a manner eerily reminiscent of the teenage diary Harry knew. "I am one of the foremost experts on healing the mind. My services are highly sought after."

"That's worrisome."

"Harry, I should remind you that while I am not Voldemort, nor am I a Dark Lord, I am still Tom Riddle. And I've been exploring the boundaries of magic in relative secrecy for the last two decades."

Harry suppressed a shiver.

"It started with Frank but I saw a genuine opportunity to gain allies and favors. Ones I intend to make full use of when the proper time comes. The Minister's daughter is not my patient by coincidence. It's worth noting that I've spent significant time inside the minds of eight different presidents, twelve prime ministers, and four kings."

"I don't want to know," Harry shook his head.

"When I heard the Minister's daughter was a target, I moved her appointment up, passed the details on, and altered the plan to fit. Voldemort brought only four other Death Eaters with him, and three of them I'd already compromised."

"Compromised?" Harry asked warily.

Tom was willing to explain this because he knew the charm of brotherhood would prevent Harry from telling anyone. "You know he's got compulsion charms, loyalty charms, and in some cases outright control charms running through the Dark Mark's connection to their soul?"

Harry nodded.

“Well, he only ever checked that the charms were still in place and were his magic. More than half the Death Eaters, though mostly the weaker ones, see me as number one, and him number two. They still listen and follow him, unless the moment comes for me to belay an impulse and give them a different compulsion.”

Harry blinked and showed Tom he wasn't too happy about this minor revelation. “You have your own Death Eater army.”

Tom frowned. “It sounds worse when you put it like that.”

“Remember when you said you weren't following Voldemort's path?”

“It's not like they know about me,” Tom argued. “And you know it's because I have ‘my own Death Eater army’ that it'll be so easy to capture them and all the others.”

“You're not going to keep them out of prison or allow them to buy their way into your favor?”

“Harry,” Tom explained. “These people believe they are loyal to Voldemort. They don't remember me modifying their soul connections.”

Harry didn't particularly care, but was still getting a feel for Tom's sincerity. “And you're going to let them hang for the things you and he made them do?”

“No, I'm not,” Tom corrected. “They will be tried as both the criminals they are, and the victims of the Dark Lord. Even if by some miracle they managed to dismiss all their actions as unwilling puppets of the Dark Lord, they still have to confess to whatever crime they committed to earn their Dark Mark. I don't know if any will ever get released from Azkaban. Frankly, I'm more concerned with the Death Eater bandits having a shortage of targets and too much free time.”

“Rumor is they hung up their ski masks and have gone legit,” Harry admitted with a grin. He pointed towards the impressive contraption he'd given up trying to unravel. “So how does this thing work?”

Tom's face lit up proudly as he explained, "There are three separate chambers surrounding the anchor."

Harry got up next to the clear aquarium section of the spiritual prison. There was a small knob surrounded by what looked like to a dark brown murky liquid. That brown bubble was inside a tall green tube that was held in place in the center. The rest of the round aquarium was filled with clear blue water.

"The inner chamber that looks brown?" Tom explained. "That's actually a bright red liquid crystal of my own design. It prevents every possible sensory input, including magic. The next chamber of green liquid surrounding that is more crystal. The green is actually the arithmantic opposite of the red. And they are both poisonous to body and soul. So if anyone managed to get through green would be completely vulnerable to the red, and vice versa."

Harry was looking closer at the anchor in the middle of the magical prison. "And the blue liquid?"

"Salt water," Tom answered happily.

"Salt water?"

"I'm opposed to conjugal visits but there are times we may wish to..." Tom's voice trailed off as he drew his wand. "Allow me to demonstrate." He cast a spell into the smooth block of obsidian at the base of the front where the aquarium met the copper base.

The clear tube protecting the green liquid crystal split vertically and unfolded open. The green fluid spilled out into the water slowly dissolving into a greenish tinted cloud.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked warily, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

"Relax," Tom quickly calmed and sent magic into the charm of brotherhood he shared with Harry. He tapped his wand on the obsidian and the water and green liquid began to swirl wildly in a tornado of fluid. Slowly the green liquid crystal separated from the water at the outer reaches of the sealed tube. Thick solid beads of

green liquid crystal were sucked away leaving the clear blue water and a reddish table tennis sized ball remaining.

Tom cast another spell and the spherical bubble surrounding the red fluid slid back into itself, allowing the other liquid crystal to disperse in the water. Another whispered spell sent the mixture swirling in a whirlpool until the red liquid crystal separated and was also sucked away. "Have to remove the poisons or they die too quick."

Harry looked curiously as Tom cast another spell into the obsidian. A jellyfish no more than three inches around and eight long appeared lazily contracting in place inside the salt water.

"Watch it," Tom pointed when Harry turned to look at him.

The jellyfish which had been calmly waving on the slightest currents suddenly froze up and darkened from a whitish pink to nearly grey.

"To be on the safe side we don't want to do this with any creatures or weak-willed others around," Tom said as he slid two thin vertical panels of glass straight through the middle of the aquarium. He twisted a few latches and tightened a few flaps before suddenly swinging the prison open. The front half of the bisected cylinder was just water, but the back half housed the anchor and the possessed jellyfish.

"And now through this, we can use legilimency on the jellyfish."

Harry saw Tom look towards the jellyfish and silently aim his wand. Tom winced a little and explained, "It stings a little. Voldemort's not really aware enough for any higher thought processes. He's definitely angry and feels threatened, but his memories are easily viewed."

Tom snapped his legilimency probe free and turned to Harry. "Anything you wanted to know about Voldemort?"

Harry was watching the barely moving jellyfish and recognized a slippery slope to nowhere good. He thought it over though and decided he should familiarize himself with the sensation. "*Legilimens*," Harry said softly, aiming towards what he hoped was the brain of the jellyfish.

He felt the cold sting in his head and left Voldemort's mind quickly. "Huh."

"What did you see?" Tom asked curiously.

"Briefs," Harry answered.

Tom glanced away from the jellyfish and to Harry. "You have total access to the innermost recesses of one of the darkest minds in centuries and you sought out..."

"Boxers or briefs," Harry nodded. "And I'm not the least bit surprised."

Tom didn't hold back his chuckle. "I should have expected something like that." He swung the two halves of the round aquarium into their closed position and latched the prison back together.

"What is that?" Harry said pointing towards the two panels of glass Tom was leaning against the wall.

"These are just glass, charmed unbreakable. They have to let magic in and out for legilimency to work," Tom explained. He pointed to the aquarium. "All three chambers are dwarven wrought crystal. A diamond blade would chip before scratching it and every form of magic I've found just bounces off it."

Harry was impressed. He saw the jellyfish shake before it twisted around suddenly and floated lifelessly to collide with the aquarium wall. "Dead?"

"Yeah," Tom said. "They only last a few minutes. Now to get Voldemort back into his cell." He cast another spell into the obsidian and the little knoblike anchor flared bright white, glowing with life.

"Ahh," Harry hissed, grabbing at his most famous scar. "What the hell?"

Tom had already sealed the first bubble-shaped chamber and filled it with the red liquid crystal as the button sized anchor darkened to its grey murky state. He turned to Harry warily, "Are you alright?"

“What the fuck is that anchoring him?” Harry snapped, relieved to see his scar hadn’t split open. It merely had startled him.

“This is one of those things that sounds a lot worse than it really is.”

“Riddlebottom,” Harry warned.

Tom admitted sheepishly, “It’s the skull of an unborn human fetus at about nine weeks.”

“Excuse me?”

“Technically nine seconds after nine minutes after nine hours after nine weeks since conception, but that’s just kind of a mouthful and not really relevant.”

“What was it doing?”

“It’s a cage for unbound souls,” Tom explained. “If the two liquid crystals ever combine it creates a fire on the level of Fiendfyre, but it also activates the soul cage to ensnare and hold. When it’s activated, I feel it twitter because of what I am, but I didn’t think I’d need to warn you. Did you perhaps unsuccessfully dabble in some soul magic?”

Harry sighed, feeling the headache leaving as quickly as it came. “Nope. The scar used to be a link between my Voldemort and me. It’s just been a while and feeling anything through it is usually a bad sign.”

“I’d imagine so.”

“Soul magic scans have always gone a bit nutty on it.”

“I assure you I had no idea,” Tom diplomatically offered. “I wasn’t trying to test you.”

Harry waved him off. “Don’t worry about it. But I got to say, I’m not big on the idea of you spending a lot of time digging into Voldemort’s mind.”

“Neither am I,” Tom explained. “But I’m not arrogant enough to believe he hasn’t left a few traps of his own devising behind. And having access to his memories could prove infinitely valuable.”

“You’ve got a plan,” Harry stated firmly while watching Tom.

Tom nodded as he engaged the second chamber and green liquid crystal. He vanished the dead jellyfish’s body. “You don’t know the spells to manipulate the chambers and I was thinking I wouldn’t tell them to you.”

“This is what the extra anchor stones are for?”

Tom nodded at how quickly Harry caught on. “Exactly. You put the latches, the doorway, the only way to access the prison under a Fidelius or something similar while leaving the rest of it visible. This way either of us could easily check the status of the prison, but it takes both of us working together to ever open it or attempt to communicate with Voldemort.”

“Why?” Harry said, turning to look at Tom curiously.

“Why protect it?”

“No, I think I got that one. I meant why do you keep freely sharing your... control with me?”

Tom waved his wand and conjured a perfect but simple chair. He sat down, expecting this to be a long conversation. “I’m an excellent judge of potential, Harry. Even Voldemort was always cognizant of the power others held. Who was a threat, who had talents, who could be used and how. Admittedly there were a few blind spots...” he paused to allow Harry to chuckle. “But overall, he could watch someone and in a matter of minutes determine their worth with a scary amount of accuracy.”

“And you?” Harry said from his own conjured chair.

Tom was not a modest man. “It takes me less than a minute. And do you know what I see when I look at you?”

Several smart-ass remarks came to mind, but Harry was too curious to do anything other than shake his head.

"An equal," Tom admitted looking Harry right in the eye. "Conveniently, one with very little interest in fame or glory."

"An equal?" Harry repeated skeptically.

"Have we not both defeated a Voldemort and fulfilled the same prophecy? We share brother wands from Dumbledore's phoenix. His familiar's blessing for the next leaders of the magical world, perhaps. There are too many similarities to call it coincidence."

Harry was slowly nodding in agreement as he got up. He moved the six extra anchor stones slightly. He began to feed power into them preparing a Fidelius.

"Perhaps it is still unreached potential," Tom softly joked. "Sirius told me that in addition to Black and Slytherin, you're well on your way to earning the title of the Lord of Ointment."

"Yeah," Harry muttered. "Hearing that you and he were getting chummy just about made my weekend."

Tom knew embarrassment and sarcasm were still the way to Harry's heart. "He told me there's even a rumor that the healing community may name this newly discovered strain the Seriously Hairy Black Bumps."

"I'll give you three guesses on who started that rumor and the first two don't count." Harry grumbled remembering several rather unpleasant floo calls he'd made from the healer's office. With a whispered phrase, he activated and sealed the Fidelius charm.

"Oww," Tom said closing his eyes in pain. "Remind me not to be looking when you do that."

Harry plopped back down into his conjured chair. "No. It doesn't feel like enough."

Tom was rubbing his aching head. "It hurts more than the legilimency did."

"Not that," Harry said. "You seeing me as an equal."

"I would think the other reasons are obvious," Tom said waving towards Voldemort's liquid prison.

Harry felt the brotherhood charm buzzing gently, hinting towards a more complicated answer.

Tom took a deep breath and explained, "I'm not going to live forever. And when I go, it's not guaranteed that I'll be pulling him with me. Someone has to make sure he is gone, and given the prophecy, it's possible you're the only person who could even do anything about it if he's not."

"Not going to live forever?" Harry questioned. "You're certain about that?"

"I plan to change the world and have a legacy that lasts the test of time, but I hold no illusions about the fragility of my existence."

"You're a Slytherin wrapped in Hufflepuff clothing, aren't you?"

"I'll take that as a compliment, Lord Slytherin."

Harry was watching Tom closely as he stated, "That was your sacrifice, wasn't it?"

Tom showed no surprise as he turned to Harry.

"I know you've researched the balance. Mortality was your sacrifice?"

Tom's face betrayed no emotion. "What was yours?"

Harry considered it a moment and shook his head. "Not today. Maybe some other time I'll tell you."

Tom inclined his head in understanding, before his eyes lit up. "Was coming here to this world, leaving your own behind, your cost?"

Harry smiled darkly, shaking his head.

“Or do you not know yet?” Tom questioned. “My understanding is that some costs aren’t realized for years.”

Harry wore a pained smile. “My victory was hollow.”

Tom’s eyes widened. “Your sacrifice was deemed sufficient?”

Harry nodded.

Tom couldn’t keep the look of sympathy off his face. He watched Harry for a few seconds. “My sacrifice was indeed mortality and a pledge to fix Voldemort’s mistakes.”

“Mistakes?”

“I can’t take responsibility for his victims, but his original goals, the admirable ones, are still worth striving for. And now that we know one way *not* to achieve them, it should be a bit easier, don’t you think?”

Harry nodded. “I don’t suppose you know your cost yet?”

Tom tried to hide his smile. “Not today, Harry. Maybe some other time.”

“Fair enough,” Harry agreed while taking note of Tom’s curious response. “Where are we anyway?”

“Well, if you’d listened to me in the first place, you’d recognize this room.”

“We’re at the Shrieking Shack?” Harry asked in surprise.

Tom nodded. “This cellar’s been hidden since my days as a student. It’s not a Fidelius but a Stavros modification. You were keyed in when I apparated us here.”

“You plan to leave Voldemort this close to Hogwarts?” Harry said doubtfully.

“To be honest, I’d prefer to put him in the Chamber of Secrets, but I think we should wait until Dumbledore’s tenure as Headmaster is over.”

Harry just looked at Tom incredulously.

“Listen, the prison is stronger and causes Voldemort more pain based on the volume of magic nearby. Yes a remote cave or the North Pole would be harder to stumble across but the liquid crystals would weaken over time. And there’s nowhere in Europe with ambient magic as strong as Hogwarts. I’m open to options, but it needs to be near a high concentration of magic, which means it’ll need to be near wizards and witches. Hogsmeade is the only all wizarding village on the island.”

“The Ministry,” Harry suggested.

Tom shrugged. “Not nearly as strong. And while I believe it’s impossible, if somehow Voldemort got out, he’d run for cover first. Not attack students or villagers. The only added danger is if someone found out he was still alive and where he was.”

“Could someone scry his location?”

“When we’re trying to read his memories, yes,” Tom admitted. “Behind Stavros wards it’d still take them days and we’ll never leave him out that long. But as long as he’s caged and surrounded by the red liquid crystal, nothing and I mean nothing can find him. No sensory input at all. No magic can find him. He certainly can’t see, hear, or even sense us.”

“And the Chamber of Secrets?”

“Has plenty of experience having safely housed a ‘monster’ for centuries,” Tom said with a smile at the supposed mystery. “I’d say let’s sneak in and put him there now, but Dumbledore’s had decades of being attuned to Hogwarts. Whenever the next Headmaster takes the job, we can slip him down there during the turnover, seal it off, and no one will be the wiser.”

Harry nodded getting used to the idea that Tom had a rational explanation for everything. "Is the basilisk in the woods behind Riddle Manor?"

Tom shook his head. "I helped him to the ocean and he went for a swim. In a few months he'll probably reach my place in Australia. I must admit I'm surprised you haven't pressed me to reveal myself to Dumbledore."

"You think he'd enjoy that?" Harry said unable to stop himself.

Tom realized his poor choice of words too late and didn't dignify Harry's question with a response.

Harry was snickering at the idea of Tom flashing Albus. "I know, I know. But truthfully, right now, I don't care much either way. Eventually Albus is going to figure you out. He's too smart not to. But it might not be a bad idea to let him see you accomplish some good things first before approaching him."

"I know you trust him," Tom felt the need to defend his position. "But ever since the moment he delivered my Hogwarts letter, he's looked at me with suspicion and fear."

"Like I said, he's smart." Harry retorted with a grin.

"He saw the magic I commanded even before I knew what magic was and he saw me as a threat to his power," Tom argued. "I could see he'd decided I was dark and evil before I'd even learned which end of the wand to hold."

"Not to piss on your parade but he wasn't exactly wrong."

Tom frowned in silent disagreement. "I was one of the younger kids in the orphanage and I had discovered a hidden power; I could bully the bullies. I could stop them from picking on me. Up until the moment Dumbledore met me, I cannot see how any eleven year old could have been any different."

“And from that he made up his mind on me?” Tom shook his head. “It was easier for him to see me as another Grindelwald than anything else.”

“Hey, you don’t have to sell me,” Harry assured. “My Albus fucked me over almost as much as my Voldemort did.”

“Really?”

Harry nodded. “I think he may have cared too much in my case though. So while he made a shitload of mistakes, it was always what he believed to be in my best interests or for the so-called greater good.”

Tom furrowed his brow. “What did he-”

Harry answered before Tom could finish the question. “He placed my freshly orphaned baby body on the door step of a family that hates magic and hated me for existing. He even admitted he knew I’d have a hard life.”

Tom just looked at Harry curiously.

Harry shrugged. “When I feel like blaming someone, it’s usually him. But the Dumbledore of this world has always treated me as an adult, as an equal, and there’s no denying the man is brilliant. Personally, I think he’ll understand and support you, but I also think it’s worth waiting until you’ve got some more evidence that you’re on the side of the angels beyond usurping a Death Eater army.”

Tom inconclusively nodded. “You’re going to tell him about the Slytherin name and some of our plans?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “We’re going to need his support on a few.”

“I think you underestimate us both, Harry. But it would be easier with Albus on our side. We can focus our initial agenda on areas of common ground.”

Harry was looking at Tom curiously. "You know inevitably someone else will notice your charmed necklace. The ministry will record and scan you. What happens if your true name and face come out?"

Tom smiled proudly. "It was actually Alan who came up with this one. But if I'm ever unable to stick that one back in the jar, then I shall readily admit to being Tom Riddle."

"Uh-huh," Harry said.

Tom put on a mask of a deadly serious scholar. "It was in my research on magical applications of mind healing techniques that I attempted to separate negative emotions like rage and jealousy."

"No," Harry shook his head, seeing where this was going.

"I actually separated those pieces of wrong and evil, but in an attempt to remove them, they attached themselves to a piece of my soul, wrenched it free and formed a separate entity from myself."

"Oh boy."

Tom nodded, without any trace of a smile. "This evil twin spiraled way beyond my control. He was as powerful as me and infinitely more ruthless. I tried to hunt him down. I tried to contain him, but people saw his face and his deeds and attributed them to me. I had to hide while I worked to defeat this horrible, unfortunate, but accidental creation."

"Enter That Fucker," Harry narrated.

"I knew I couldn't ever show my face, so I created a new identity. A different face and a new name I could use until the opportunity to finally end the madness presented itself. I was able to destroy Voldemort, but by that time Tom Riddle's legacy had been set in stone. It was not an easy decision but I felt I could help more people by remaining hidden under the only face and name I thought of myself as for the last two decades."

Tom's look of pained sincerity twisted into a smug victorious smile. "Now does that story seem more plausible or does it make more

sense that I'm just a split piece of the former Dark Lord's soul who leeches Neville Longbottom's life before suddenly deciding the Dark Lord was a bad guy?"

Harry was suitably impressed. "And of course if or when it breaks you'll also have years of accolades, community service, and countless influential people willing to speak of your high moral character."

"I hope it never does break," Tom agreed. "But I do like to be prepared. Now if you'll excuse me, Alan's going to be getting officially released from custody, be declared a hero by the DMLE, answer a few questions for reporters, and then make the front page for being a close personal friend of mine."

"Yeah, Albus is expecting me by now as well." Harry got up and vanished his own conjured chair. "If I come up with somewhere better for this, are you open to moving it?"

"Harry, if you come up with somewhere better, I'll want to move it just as much as you," Tom assured him.

"You know we're going to have to make plans in case either of us dies," Harry commented.

Tom nodded slowly. "I've actually got a few ideas for that."

"Yeah?"

"But it's a situation a lot like Albus'," Tom explained. "We should put it off for a while. At least until we genuinely trust each other."

Harry thought that one over and suspected it to involve soul magic. "Okay."

"Good luck, Harry," Tom said as he apparated away.

Harry took a breath to ready himself. "I'm only going to be indirectly threatening and blackmailing one of the most powerful and respected wizards of all time. What could I possibly need luck for?" He looked

around the room and realized he was talking to himself again. He apparated to the edge of Hogwarts wards.

Right away, the magic of Hogwarts was singing to him in a way it never had before. He used to feel like Hogwarts was his home away from home, but now it felt as natural as an extra layer of skin. He only thought about the reaction when his ring finger began to tingle happily. He twisted it around canceling its invisibility and saw the jewel in the Slytherin family ring was glittering wildly.

Harry knew people said Hogwarts loved and took care of all her children. He grinned under the realization that she had a new favorite.

He cast an oculamagi spell over his eyes and looked at the wards as he walked. They looked no different, but Harry was certain they felt different. He began to theorize that the wards recognized his status too. He had barely considered the possibility before his ring finger was tingling in response.

Harry looked both ways before throwing caution into the wind. He apparated up to the front steps of the castle with a soft pop.

Harry couldn't stop the smile splitting his face in half as he canceled the oculamagi spell. "We're going to keep this little tidbit to ourselves."

When his finger tingled again, he couldn't help but wonder if the Hogwarts' wards had understood and agreed. He pressed his hand against the outer stone wall, closed his eyes in concentration, and thought about what he wanted to see. He opened his eyes and couldn't believe his luck. "Sweet."

He hopped up the stairs and began to walk through the castle with an extra skip in his step. He reached the gargoyle guarding the headmaster's office and began a staring match with it. A few seconds later the gargoyle silently slid out of the way and let Harry up.

Harry knocked on the door from the outer chamber.

"Harry?" Albus called out. "Come in, come in."

“Is this a bad time?”

Albus stacked up the paperwork on his desk and shuffled it into one of his drawers. “Not at all. I’ve been expecting you in fact, as I’m sure you remember.”

“Right,” Harry said as he walked over to Fawkes perch and gave the partially sleeping bird a gentle rub on the back of its neck.

“Harry, I know you can’t tell me much, but I was hoping-”

“Actually Albus,” Harry said, plopping down into the chair across from the Headmaster. “I’m not here to talk about David Monroe.”

“Oh?” Albus said in faint shock. “Still waiting on your Order member merit badge?”

Harry chuckled. “No, the truth is I came here to talk about you.”

Albus got up from his seat behind the desk and moved to the chair next to Harry’s. He turned it to face the younger man on equal ground. “Me?”

“Yeah, you,” Harry said. He hesitated only a second before jumping right into it. “Because the thing is, you’ve been spreading yourself too thin.”

Albus popped a lemon sherbet into his mouth and was surprisingly intrigued. He nodded at Harry, indicating he should continue.

“Between running the Order, fighting a war for the past three decades, your duties as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation, and undoubtedly countless more I’m unaware of, you have been only an adequate headmaster of Hogwarts.”

“Adequate?”

Harry nodded. “The students look at you in awe and most of them are probably too intimidated to even approach you. I don’t doubt you put

their health and welfare first, but that is first on a long list of responsibilities.”

Albus was frowning. “I admit the times I’ve had to leave the school and defend innocents from attack, I’ve had similar worries. But with the defeat of Voldemort, I expect my schedule to lighten.”

“Lightening is good,” Harry agreed. “Lightening is very good. In fact I was thinking of helping you out with that.”

“Oh dear.”

“This is a good thing,” Harry meekly argued.

Albus warily asked, “What do you want?”

“There are a number of answers to that question,” Harry said with a mischievous smile.

“Harry,” Albus tiredly urged.

“I want you to become the greatest headmaster Hogwarts has ever had,” Harry quickly answered. “I want your complete focus to be on the education of students now that fears of imminent attack will soon be a relic of the past.”

Albus still wasn’t sure what Harry was up to. “It’s not that simple, Harry.”

“It can be,” Harry said. “Anything you convince me is worth doing, I can help make happen. You want to introduce some new electives, hire more teachers, offer more specialized tuition, host weekend demonstrations, bring in more experts-”

“Harry,” Albus interrupted. “I don’t think you appreciate how complicated and limited my budget is.”

“So let’s increase it.”

“The Board of Governors would never-”

“Here’s a thought,” Harry interjected. “You want to get rid of the board? It would certainly make major changes easier.”

Albus frowned in confusion. “What’s going on?”

Harry helped himself to a glass of firewhiskey and left the bottle out in case Albus wanted some. “When the Wizengamot formally reconvenes in the fall, I will be wearing a declaration patch and Lord Black is going to nominate me for Chief Warlock.”

Albus sat up straighter at the implied threat. “Really?”

Harry nodded happily. “Yup. And I’d appreciate it if you seconded the nomination. But if you want to settle it in the ring, I will.”

Albus smiled at the idea. “And do you think you could take me?”

“In a fair fight?” Harry shrugged. “I have a few doubts. But I don’t fight fair, Albus. I cheat and I cheat a lot.”

“Hmm,” Albus commented, silently finding himself agreeable to Harry’s nomination but not willing to admit that aloud just yet.

“I should mention that Lord Black won’t be nominating me as Lord Black,” Harry said with a grin and a salute of his glass. “He’s going to nominate me under my new title: Lord Slytherin.”

Albus wandlessly summoned the bottle of firewhiskey and poured himself a glass.

Harry gave Albus time to compose himself, inwardly relishing moments like these.

“Lord,” Albus had to force the name out, “Slytherin.”

Harry twisted the ring allowing it to be visible. The ring glittered and twinkled in the light. “Hogwarts loves me.”

“The Slytherin family ring accepted you,” Albus stated, “and made you Lord Slytherin.”

“Don’t have kittens on me,” Harry chided while twisting it back into invisibility. “The horcrux is gone. And really, did you think I just gave up those other horcruxes for nothing?”

Albus goggled at Harry unable to accept the idea of bartering pieces of the Dark Lord’s soul for one of the most infamous and hated wizarding lines.

Harry slowly sipped his glass, waiting for the shock and surprise to leave Albus’ face.

Albus couldn’t decide what question to ask first. “But you were a Gryffindor!”

“Irony, isn’t it?”

“Harry, this is... this is...”

“I know, I know.” Harry pointed towards the snoozing artifact on the shelf behind him. “But the Sorting Hat told me Slytherin would help me on the road to greatness. And you taught me all about second chances. Anyways, I’m telling you this now as a courtesy, and also so that you’ll take me a bit more seriously when I say we can dismantle the Board of Governors. I can help get you anything you need to reestablish Hogwarts as the finest institute of magical learning in the world.”

Albus was silently watching Harry. “This is what you want? No offense Harry, but it sounds a little more... altruistic than usual.”

“The Order’s disbanding, the war’s over,” Harry reminded. “You’ve had a great run Albus, and you’ve shouldered the hopes and dreams of several generations of wizards for an immensely long time. But a new world is forming and these metaphorical torches can be passed down smoothly... or I can cheat.”

Albus was finding it oddly comforting to hear Harry’s willingness to accept responsibility. “And where does David Monroe fit into all of this?”

“He’s at the center of it,” Harry said. “When I said he was the next Albus Dumbledore, I meant it. I’ll tell you now that by next spring, he’ll have turned his popularity into the Minister of Magic position.”

“Monroe as Minister and you as Chief Warlock?”

“Scary, huh?”

Albus sighed. “I find most prospects involving you to be scary, Harry. And the thought that there’s another wizard with an even more mysterious past, as much power, and more ambition than you is even more worrisome.”

“For what it’s worth,” Harry said flaring magic into the charm of brotherhood he shared with Albus, “this is the weaker of the two charms of brotherhood I’m sustaining.”

Albus responded with an equal push of magic. “I take it you trust him more now.”

Harry got a mixed look on his face. “You know, every day he doesn’t try to kill me, I trust him a little bit more.”

“Oh Harry.”

“Yeah, he’s a character.”

Albus had already decided to accept Harry’s suggestions and was looking forward to the weight of the world on others’ shoulders. “I’m guessing that seeking a more active role in politics was not your idea.”

Harry grumbled. “Tell me about it. At first, David wanted me to run for Minister. I quickly disabused him of that notion.”

“So most of this is his doing?” Albus questioned.

Harry could tell Albus was fishing but he had planned on explaining most of this anyway. “I shit you not. He’s got a fifty year plan.”

“Oh my,” Albus grinned at Harry’s reticence.

“Step one is to cultivate the environment, alter public perception on things.”

Albus forewent the firewhiskey and poured himself a cup of tea. “Like what?”

“Treatment of dark creatures, misconceptions of muggles and muggle things, power and prestige established by birthright rather than virtue, the usual,” Harry explained indifferently.

“And if I were to press you for some more details?”

“Alright, here’s one he’s talked me into,” Harry agreed sitting up straighter. “You know there are dark magics and then there are *dark* magics.”

Albus decided a dash of firewhiskey in his tea wouldn’t be such a bad idea.

“I’m referring to the more powerful aspects of magic that get classified as dark out of ignorance or potential for abuse. The idea that if it’s something the average wizard cannot safely do, then it’s something no one should do.”

“Harry, you cannot base your understanding of wizards on men of our caliber.”

“I’m not, but here’s an example I didn’t know,” Harry suggested. “Blood magic and necromancy are not things you want just anyone to be able to study, but you can open a line of communication with the dead for just a couple minutes with a cost of two drops of blood and no other adverse affects. That’s it. Two drops. Magical portraits require a remarkably similar procedure with the living but for them it’s legal and acceptable. Why not allow a murder victim to identify his attacker in a carefully controlled courtroom environment? Why not allow families a safe way to say goodbye?”

“That is never all those magics are used for,” Albus pointed out for the sake of argument.

"I know," Harry admitted. "But that's the idea. No magic is forbidden if it doesn't impinge on others' freedoms or rights. I'm not advocating anarchy or a free for all, but merely governmental oversight and regulation. Setting up a system where a wizard like you or I can prove and establish that we have the capability to safely explore an arcane field of magic, and are then authorized to use it."

"That would take a lot of work," Albus commented.

Harry shrugged. "Right now the government's regulating just a few specific things like animagi registration or apparition licensing. We're saying instead of covering a few small exceptions, cover the broader areas."

"As proud as wizards are, you know they won't take kindly to being officially ranked by power and ability," Albus added.

"True," Harry said. "But that's because a bunch of pompous weak arses think the world is entitled to cater to them due to their birthright. All of this will undoubtedly be an ongoing debate."

"I find myself relaxing," Albus admitted. "And looking forward to focusing on Hogwarts."

"So you're in?"

"I am willing to second your nomination," Albus agreed. "In exchange for Lord Slytherin's assistance and hands off approach at Hogwarts."

"An occasional pinkie here and there, but hands off," Harry agreed.

Albus nodded in acquiescence. "And I wouldn't mind getting a crack at that duel behind closed doors. It would give me an opportunity to teach you how to not waste so much energy so quickly."

"Yeah, yeah," Harry grumbled feeling slightly embarrassed over his reliance on pepper-up potions.

Albus was smiling and fighting his instinctual need to know everything. "A fifty year plan?"

“Oh lordy,” Harry shook his head. “You wouldn’t believe some of the things he wants to do.”

“Do tell,” Albus urged.

Harry considered it and decided. “Okay, this one is probably... twenty years down the line and will require international assistance.”

Albus interjected, “The war with Voldemort has not earned us very good relations with the rest of the world.”

“Probably why it’s twenty years away,” Harry said. “But basically, he thinks that a few European Ministries working together can pitch in and... well, *buy* the ruins of Atlantis from the merfolk.”

Albus’ eyes widened having only heard the rumor that the merfolk knew the location of Atlantis.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “He doesn’t think the resources exist to recreate it, but that we could fix the island enough to get it back up into the sky. It comes from a time when they weren’t any satellites or airplanes, so it’ll be a warder’s dream and a diplomatic nightmare. Especially if access is restricted to only the most powerful and intelligent.”

“Good lord,” Albus blinked.

Harry shrugged indifferent. “I’m still not completely convinced that he’s not trying to build an army of super-wizards to conquer the world from the sky with that one. But hey, time will tell, right?”

“Harry,” Albus pleaded as he cleaned his glasses out of habit. “Perhaps you should exercise more restraint in revealing the frightening details for the future you and your cohort have planned.”

“Perhaps I should,” Harry agreed, suspecting he’d already revealed more than Tom would have liked. “But I know it’s not escaped your notice that our biggest obstacle is going to be overcoming the ignorance of people and the irrational cultural taboos. That fight begins here, in educating the students and turning Hogwarts into an

institution where people don't just learn magic, but they learn to love magic and be challenged by it."

"You don't think we do that now?" Albus asked curiously.

"I think," Harry considered his words carefully. "I think you've taught them how to survive in the face of war, stressing defense and its applications in all the other disciplines."

Albus inclined his head in agreement.

"And I think you have the rest of this year and most of summer to figure out exactly what changes you want to make. If it's significant, you may have to sell me on the idea, but we'll make it happen."

"Headmaster! Headmaster!" the frantic voice of the Deputy Headmistress called out as she rushed up the stairs.

Albus glanced at Harry worriedly. "Minerva, what is it? What's the matter?"

Minerva glanced at Harry sitting there calmly and explained. "It's the castle. All of it."

"What?" Albus asked, sensing nothing through the wards.

"It's," she leaned forward and whispered in horror. "It's green."

Albus hurried to his window and peered around the edge to see the towers and walls had all changed to an unmistakable bright kelly green. "Harry!"

"I should go," Harry shouted as he ran down the steps. His first impulse had been to apparate away but he wasn't ready to reveal that one just yet. "I'll talk to you later, Albus!"

"Harry! Get back here!" Albus yelled. "Change it back, Harry. This isn't hands off!"

Harry's mix of running away and walking nonchalantly had him determinedly power-walking to the entrance hall. He looked to his left

as a familiar man came barreling up from the dungeons in a remarkably similar power-walk.

“Sirius?”

“Hey Harry,” Sirius said moving way too briskly to call it simply walking.

“What are you doing?”

Sirius smiled brightly. “It’s possible I may have been watching an engorging ward in action that was secretly cast over Snivelly’s office doorframe. What are you doing?”

Harry grinned in step with his godfather. “It’s possible I may have turned Hogwarts green.”

“That was you!” Sirius cheered before thinking it over. They both slowed to a walk when they reached open air. “Of course that was you. Hey, I was thinking of messing with Narcissa.”

“Yeah?”

“Bellatrix says Narcissa won’t answer her letters. I guess she’s all snippy about her husband’s many disgraces and the arrest of her son.”

“The nerve of some people.”

“Yeah, well,” Sirius grinned. “She’s collecting a fat insurance settlement for the loss of their family safe. Tonks was thinking ‘Narcissa’ could be spotted illegally selling items she claimed lost in the fire.”

“That’s cold.”

Sirius shrugged. “Tonks has a bit of a mean streak.”

“Yeah,” Harry nodded. “They install those at the auror academy.”

“Really?”

Harry sent an invisible finger to poke Sirius in the eye but it crashed into an invisible ward that flickered in and out of view.

“Ha-ha!” Sirius cheered. “Never again shall you-*aahh!*”

Harry rolled his eyes at the futility of Sirius’ attempts at protection and quickly pinched the back of Sirius’ knees. He crumpled immediately, flopping backwards with an awkward yelp.

“Oh come on,” Sirius shouted indignantly as he struggled to his feet. “How fair is that?”

“I suppose I could’ve pounded my way through that little ward band, but if I’m not careful about when it collapses I might push your eyeball into your brain.”

“That would be bad,” Sirius commented dusting his robe off. “Here’s a thought to twist your pickle: if you hadn’t saved Ginny in the Chamber of Secrets, you could’ve had teenage Tom Riddle easily clean up a bodiless Voldemort.”

“A Riddleasley?” Harry posited. “Can you even imagine how obsessed with me he would have been?”

“Hey!” an angry ghost appeared to defend herself. “Ooh! Are we going to the Hog’s Head?”

“Ginny,” Harry whined as he made sure no one was looking.

“Here dementor, dementor, dementor,” Ginny called out. She covered her translucent mouth with her hands and proceeded to make a rasping noise that sounded vaguely like a strangled penguin.

“Ginny, get outta here,” Harry snapped.

“Make me,” she pouted before turning towards the forest and making the same strange noise again.

Harry growled slightly and Ginny’s ghostly body disappeared from view with a pop.

“Hey Harry,” Sirius wondered while glancing over his shoulder. “Was that really a dementor call?”

“I doubt it.”

“I have a hypothetical question.” Sirius was doing a poor job of concealing his concern. “How much justifiable jealousy is permitted before I turn into a woman?”

Harry arched an eyebrow at his godfather. “If you have to ask, you’re a woman. So spit it out already.”

“We can’t do our thing together anymore,” Sirius said thinking the glory of their thieving days had passed. “You’re magically bound to a pair of manipulative bastards-”

“I thought you liked them,” Harry interrupted.

“I do,” Sirius asserted. “They’re still manipulative bastards. Moony is a vindictive asshole and I like him well enough.”

“Okay,” Harry conceded.

“But it feels like we’re not going to have nearly as much to do with each other,” Sirius said, trying not to pout.

“Padfoot, I’m not kicking you out of the new Slytherin ancestral home or anything.”

“Oi!” Sirius shouted. “That’s my house!”

“And we’ve still got our gift.”

“The ointment will clear that up.”

“Not that gift,” Harry chided. “Alright, here’s an idea. There’s a dueling tournament in Rome in about a month. Top two spots get automatic invitations to the world championships.”

“You’d kill me.”

“I was thinking the pairs division actually.”

Sirius was intrigued. "That could be fun. But it's a little... civilized."

"There's always the rumors about the Vatican while we're there."

"Now we're talking," Sirius agreed. "I was also considering some alternate outlets for our talents."

"Yeah?"

Sirius nodded. "I know the vaults would be either impossible or more trouble than they're worth, but what would you think about breaking into the lowest levels of Gringotts-"

"Sirius," Harry said tiredly in a manner reminiscent of Albus.

"-and stealing a dragon," Sirius finished. "Or two."

Harry sighed. "You know we're supposed to stay out of trouble."

"You're the one tantalizing me with rumors of the Catholic Church's secret stash," Sirius argued.

"That's out of the country," Harry argued. "It doesn't count."

"I thought you might say that," Sirius happily agreed. "And when I did a little dragon-snatching recon, I just happened to have made a copy of all of Gringotts planned future excavation projects in Greece and Egypt."

"You want to go tomb raiding?" Harry asked. "You know curse-breaking isn't the same thing as bypassing modern wards."

"It's similar-ish," Sirius defended.

"You know what could be a lot of fun?" Harry rhetorically asked. "I was thinking we could grab a great big bag of gillyweed-"

"What kind of weed?"

"*Gilly*, Sirius," Harry said shaking his head. "Just take a whole bunch of it, a couple of kits, and then we could scour some hard to reach ocean floors for sunken ships and buried treasure."

“Booty?” Sirius asked excitedly.

“It can be part of a worldwide tour of nudist beaches,” Harry said with a smile. “And there are some pretty scary creatures if we go deep enough.”

“In the ocean too,” Sirius added.

“Yes, Padfoot,” Harry agreed before noticing his godfather was still hesitating. “What’s got sand in your vagina now?”

Sirius grinned before making a puppy dog face. “See it’s nice that we still can do stuff together, but I was thinking there’s this thing called a charm of brotherhood.”

“I’m not doing another of those,” Harry insisted. “It’s weird enough feeling both when I’m talking to one of them about the other. If they were ever in the same room with me, it’d feel like bad sex.”

Harry saw Sirius was still pouting. “But you know what we could do is to make an official blood tie between the Houses of Slytherin and Black.”

“What’s that do?” Sirius asked curiously.

“For one, as the two family Lords, we would legally be blood brothers,” Harry explained. “That’s way more than any charm.”

They’d arrived at the Hog’s Head and Sirius held the door open for Harry. “I think I’d like that.”

“Will that soothe your overdeveloped feminine side?”

Sirius just smiled and nodded. He pulled Harry over to the side and turned him away from the bar. “Listen Harry.”

Harry saw Sirius was still showing emotion and began to wonder if Moony had doused him with a potion or maybe estrogen.

“Things all around us are always going to be changing.” Sirius put a comforting hand on Harry’s shoulder and gently explained, “And I just want you to know...”

Harry had his back to the bar and no warning before the charm activated and a magical boot swung up into his twig and giggleberries with enough force to lift him off the ground. Harry caught a glimpse of James Potter’s smiling face as his body went limp and he fell to the floor.

Sirius shouted the victorious end of his sentence. “You got skunked by bizarro Prongs this time, *bitch!*”

“Oh,” Harry lowly moaned as he cupped his junk. A pair of invisible magical arms grabbed onto Sirius and slammed him headfirst into the bar.

Sirius’ forehead hit the brass edge with a loud boink that sent him reeling backward. He crashed into a table and was squeezing his eyes shut while twitching on his back on the floor. “What the fuck!”

James winced at the violent retaliation and began to question his role in this. He heard both Lord Blacks groaning on the floor and noticed no one else in the bar was even paying them much attention.

A regular at the bar saw James’ look of confusion. “They’re always like that. No, what you gotta watch out for is when that one next to you gets some firewhiskey in him.”

“What?” James gasped turning to his son in surprise.

“Moe,” Jimmy snipped. “Shut it!”

Moe just laughed and pointed at Jimmy. “I saw this one beat himself up. Punched his own face purple. Damnedest thing.”

“Fucking hell, Harry. I think you knocked my brain loose,” Sirius said as he made his way back to his feet. “Are we cool?”

Harry was taking slow deliberate steps in an effort to walk it off. “Yeah, we’re good.”

“Lovely,” James said rubbing his hands together. “Because my dinner arrived while we were waiting under the invisibility cloak.”

“Oh no, no, no,” Harry said, shaking his head. “I’m not done with *you* yet, Potter.”

James saw the look in Harry’s eyes and felt the eager glares of most everyone else in the room. “Right. You know I just remembered some paperwork I forgot to finish.”

“Dad?” Jimmy said as he saw his father briskly heading for the door. “What about your food?”

James just waved over his shoulder without turning around. “You can keep my sandwich!”

Harry furrowed his brow and tilted his head in thought.

“Is that turkey?” Sirius asked, grabbing half of James’ sandwich.

“I’m getting the weirdest feeling of déjà vu,” Harry said, grabbing the other half of sandwich. He plopped down into a chair, sitting across from Sirius and Jimmy.

“Any idea from what?” Sirius asked in between bites.

Harry had the answer on the tip of his tongue, but he just couldn’t quite get it. “No,” he said with a resigned sigh. He chewed up another bite of his sandwich. “It’s like I can hear those words, over and over: you can keep my sandwich.”

“With all the déjà vu, do you guys ever think that maybe we really did play the Obliviate game?” Jimmy wondered.

Harry glanced at the little brother he never had. “We play it all the time. And yes Jimmy, you’re horrible at it.”

“Really?”

“It’s usually after a few rounds of the Gullibility game.”

“Okay now you’re just making fun of me,” Jimmy insisted, before worriedly clarifying, “Right?”

“Why would you remember ‘You can keep my sandwich?’” Sirius repeated.

“I don’t know,” Harry pleaded. “If I did, it’d just be a memory, or with my luck a traumatic flashback.”

“It’s a fucking retarded line.”

“Thank you, Sirius.”

“I’m just saying it’d never make it onto a T-shirt.”

“You’re still talking.”

“But there’s nothing memorable about that line.”

“You’re only harping on it because I can’t remember it and you know that frustrates the hell out of me.”

Sirius grinned. “And your point is?”

“Hang on,” Jimmy interrupted. “I don’t even know how to cast a memory charm.”

“That’s probably why you’re so awful at the game,” Harry retorted.

“Hmmp,” Jimmy grumbled. “And here I was going to tell you the significance of your line.”

“Oh come on,” Harry whined. “Tell me.”

Jimmy thrust a victorious fist into the air. He made the low rumbling sound of an approving crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen, there’s a new leader in the Gullibility game.”

“All because he can’t remember the line ‘You can keep my sandwich.’” Sirius happily reminded.

"One of these days," Harry warned them both. "One of these days I'm just gonna snap, go dark, and kill you all. You realize that, right?"

"Not today, Harry," Sirius said.

"No, not today," Harry agreed. "But tomorrow's a distinct possibility."

THE END

Author's Note: *I struggled a little, rewriting the last scene a number of times before finally realizing that after well over two hundred thousand words, I didn't have to end it with the perfect zinger as much as I had to end it. This fic has been a lot of work and in my mind will always be remembered as the story that was interrupted by my Mom kicking cancer's ass. It was intended to be different from the usual Harry Potter fanfiction because Voldemort was a minor sub-plot in a story about the relationship between Harry and Sirius. A relationship where instead of Sirius becoming the new James to Harry (father son), it was about Harry becoming the new James to Sirius (best friends).*

I think I accomplished my goal, but I'd love to hear any final comments, thoughts, or opinions you are willing to share. Whether you've been waiting on updates eagerly, or were one of the lucky ones to read the whole thing straight through without suffering the anguish of my cliffhangers, a little more feedback will make me feel loved, appreciated, grateful, stroke my ego, make me a better writer, or most likely, inspire me to write more. And feel free to thank the excellent alphas and betas helping me straighten out the mess of ideas that went into this fic: Jim, IP, Chuck, Chris, Rob, Sean, JJ, and the others I will edit in here as soon as I remember them.

Since I've been hearing the calls already, I shall say there are no plans for a sequel here and I'd mark it as 'unlikely' to ever have one. As for what's next for me, I will admit to being taken in by an idea for an original story in a universe of my own making. I'm going to give that a try for a while, but it is inevitable more fanfic bunnies will bug

me until I write them. Could be a little while before I get to them as I want to give a fair shot to writing about my own characters, but I'll be back with a new story sometime. Thanks for all the reviews and actually reading this long ass author's note. Now about that one last review I asked for...